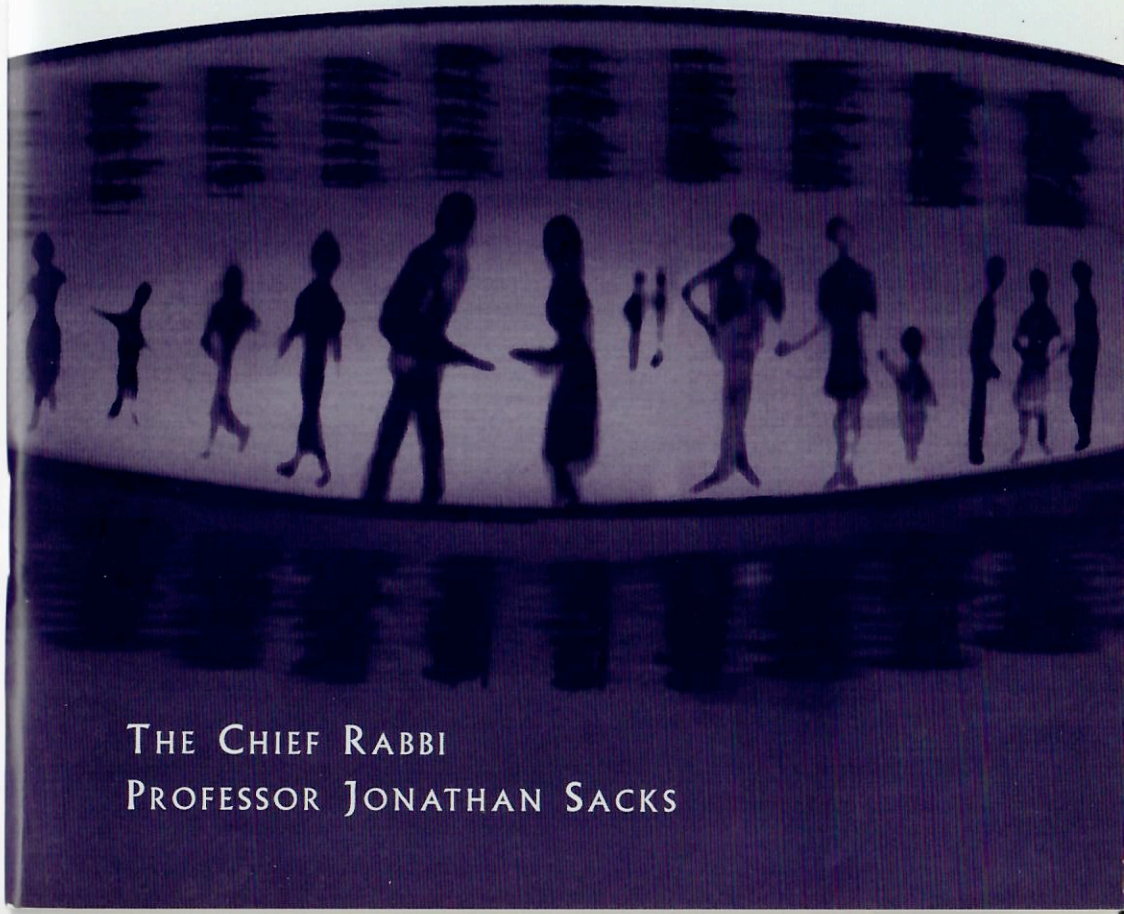
# From Renewal to Responsibility



The Chief Rabbi
Professor Jonathan Sacks

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The Decade of Jewish Renewal has come to a close. Eight years ago, as part of that programme I launched Jewish Continuity with a series of pamphlets. Much has happened since then. The community has been reinvigorated, and I want to express my thanks to the many people and organisations who have helped to make that vision a reality.

I want also to outline my thoughts for the next phase of my Chief Rabbinate. As you will see, I have called it Jewish Responsibility. To me that phrase signals what is most challenging in Jewish life; not waiting for something to happen but joining hands to make it happen.

I look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you.

Chief Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks

# FROM RENEWAL TO RESPONSIBILITY

# A DECADE OF RENEWAL

THE SCENE: a cafe in Vienna in the 1930s. Two Jews are sitting, having a cup of coffee. The first is reading a Jewish newspaper. The second is reading a notoriously antisemitic tabloid. "How can you read that?" says the first. "It's full of diatribes against the Jews." The second smiles and says, "When you open your paper what do you find? The Jews are assimilating. Their numbers are declining. The community is divided. When I read my paper what do I discover? The Jews own the banks. They run the economy. They control the media . . . No, if you want good news about the Jewish people, always go to the antisemites."

When it comes to good news about the Jewish people, we shouldn't have to go to the antisemites. As a people, we are hard on ourselves: quick to criticise, slow to praise. We notice failure; success all too often passes us unawares. Abba Eban once called us "the people who can't take yes for an answer."

This is not a Jewish response. To the contrary, one of the fundamental Jewish values is *hakarat hatov*, 'recognising the good'. To see the world through Jewish eyes is to search out the goodness in each person, every situation – to identify it, praise it and thereby strengthen it. That is what I want to do here: to give thanks to the British Jewish community for all it has done these past ten years in making our ancient faith new again.

Ours is a small community, one-twentieth the size of the Jewish populations of Israel or the United States. Yet for the past ten years it has shown an exuberance, energy and creativity equal to any in the world. This has been the work of thousands of individuals, hundreds of communities and dozens of organisations. British Jewry is not perfect. There is much still to do. But one thing has happened. There has been genuine renewal.

As the Decade of Jewish Renewal reaches its close, I want – without

naming individuals or organisations - to say thanks to some of the groups who made it happen:

- To the people who helped build more Jewish schools in the past decade than at almost any previous time in our history
- To the teachers who made Jewish schools models of academic excellence
- To the parents who responded in such extraordinary numbers that, however fast we build Jewish day schools, we still cannot keep up with the demand
- To those responsible for the adult education programmes that have drawn crowds in numbers unprecedented in Anglo-Jewry
- To the many rabbis who have made synagogue services more participative and spiritually meaningful – through such innovations as beginners' minyanim, explanatory services and alternative services
- To the chazanim and choirs who have given a new lease of life to liturgical music, bringing back some of the great cantorial traditions as well as creating superb new liturgical music
- To the rabbis and layleaders who, by developing social, educational programmes, have helped turn congregations into communities, and shuls into genuine *batei knesset* – homes of community life in all its forms
- To our many youth groups, who have deepened the Jewish content of their programmes and continue to be our single greatest asset when it comes to capturing the imagination and commitment of the next generation
- To our students, who have shaped outstanding educational programmes as well as taking a leading role in fighting racism on campus
- To the many outreach organisations who have become an important presence in the community, bringing back hundreds of estranged or alienated young Jews into an active engagement with our faith
- To the people who in the last ten years have helped create new forms of communication within our community and beyond, among them Jewish radio programmes and websites



- To the many organisations who have given the cultural life of our community an unprecedented range and variety
- To the outstanding Jewish welfare organisations throughout the country, who daily care for so many in our community, with such professionalism, dignity and sensitivity
- To the professionals and many volunteers who, in difficult times, have ensured the safety of every major communal event and institution, enabling Jewish life to continue as normal.

And of course there are dozens, hundreds of others. My own special thanks must go to my late and revered predecessor, Lord Jakobovits of blessed memory, who created so much on which we have been able to build. Thinking of him I feel as did the medieval sages when they said, "We may be dwarves, but we sit on the shoulders of giants."

The result has been a series of measurable changes. There are more children at Jewish day schools. There are more adults engaging in life-long learning. The activity levels of the community have risen. The Jewish voice has been more prominent in national debates. Many of our leading organisations have emerged more efficient and professional than they were before. Jewish life has become more self-confident, more exuberant. These things really are good news.

**"Jewish life has become more self-confident, more exuberant."**

They are all the more remarkable when we consider the backdrop against which they have taken place. British culture today is aggressively secular. The place of religion in public life has become more marginal. That the Jewish community has been able to re-energise itself in these circumstances is remarkable – all the more so given the demographic fact that we are an ageing and numerically declining community. We may be smaller but we are stronger, and better equipped to face the future.

For Elaine and myself, it has been a privilege merely to be part of such a community at such a time. These achievements were not ours but yours, and

we want to say Thank you – to you and above all to the Almighty, *shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh*, "who has kept us alive, and sustained us, and allowed us to see this time."

But to be a Jew is not to stand still. Jewish time begins with two journeys: Abraham's from Mesopotamia, Moses' and the Israelites' from Egypt. The words that set our history in motion were *Lekh Lekha*, "Travel, go, move on." Or as Robert Frost put it, "But I have promises to keep / And miles to go before I sleep." The time has come to chart the next stage of the journey, to look at where we are and where we must go from here.

# JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

JEWS ARE, to put it mildly, a small people, less than one-quarter of one per cent of the population of the world. For every Jew today there are 165 Christians and 83 Muslims. I remember being given, in 1991, a directory of Jewish communities around the world. For each country it listed the total population, followed by the number of Jews. I will never forget the entry for China. It read: China, population 1 billion, Jewish population 5. I remember saying to Elaine, "If there are five Jews in China, I am sure of two things. There will be six shuls, and someone somewhere will be saying, The Jews are running the country." More than three thousand years later, the words of Moses remain true (Deut. 7:7): "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of peoples." We were then. We are now.

Why then did God choose this tiny people – us and our ancestors – for so great a task, to be His witnesses in the world, the people who fought against the idols of the age in every age, the carriers of His message to humanity? Why did He promise Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would be innumerable, as many as the stars of the sky and the sand on the sea shore? Why are we so few? What is the meaning of this dissonance between the greatness of the task and the smallness of the people charged with carrying it out?

There is a passage in the Torah that deserves our greatest attention. "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the Lord a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no mishap (*negef*) will come on them when you number them" (Ex. 30:12). This is a strange verse. It suggests that it is dangerous to count Jews. Many centuries later, ignoring this warning, King David took a census of the people, and disaster struck the nation. To this day, we do not needlessly count Jews, even

to calculate whether there is a minyan in the synagogue. Our custom is to take a verse with ten words, and use that instead. Why is it dangerous to count Jews?

The classic commentators give many answers. I want to suggest another. Why do nations take censuses? Why do they count their numbers? To estimate their strength – military, political, or economic. Behind the ancient practice of counting populations is the assumption that there is strength in numbers. The larger the people, the stronger it is. That is why it is dangerous to count Jews. If we ever came to believe that there is strength in numbers we would, God forbid, give way to despair. For four thousand years the strength of the Jewish people has never lain in numbers. In ancient Israel, our ancestors were a small nation surrounded by mighty empires: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. In the Diaspora, throughout the centuries and continents, Jews were a minority without rights or power. Jewish strength did not lie in numbers.

Where then did it lie? To this the Torah gives an answer of surpassing beauty. In effect, God tells Moses, "Do not count Jews. Ask them to give, and then count the contributions. That is how you measure the strength of the Jewish people." In terms of numbers we are small. But in terms of our contributions, we are vast. In almost every age, Jews have given something special to the world. In one era it was the Hebrew Bible, the most influential document in the history of the world. In later centuries Jews produced a never-ending stream of scholars, scientists, poets and philosophers. In more recent times, as the doors of Western society opened, they made their mark in one field after another: business, industry, the arts and sciences, cinema, the media, medicine and almost every field of academic life. Among the shapers of the modern mind, a disproportionate number have been Jews. In the United States alone, where they form a mere 2 per cent of the population, they have contributed 40% of its Nobel Prize winners in science and economics, and a half of its most influential intellectuals. In Britain, two of the last three Lord Chief Justices have been Jews.



There is a mystery here in need of demystification. It is not that Jews are brighter, cleverer, more energetic or talented than others. That is a racist doctrine and I reject it utterly. Nor is it that Jews, more than others, are driven to succeed. That is at the heart of much antisemitic propaganda, and it is false. The simple answer, given in the Torah and engraved in Jewish sensibility, is that to be a Jew is to be asked to give, to contribute, to make a difference, to help in the monumental task that has engaged Jews since the dawn of our history, to make the world a home for the Divine presence, a place of justice, compassion, human dignity and the sanctity of life. Though our ancestors cherished their relationship with God, they never saw it as a privilege. Instead they saw it as a responsibility. Except in their earliest days, God never offered to do things for them: He asked them to do things for and with Him. He challenged them to give. He empowered them to lead. In that familiar yet astonishing phrase He invited them to be His "partners in the work of creation."

**"Do not count Jews. Ask them to give, and then count the contributions. That is how you measure the strength of the Jewish people."**

I wonder if ever a religion or a philosophy has taken a more challenging view of the nature of mankind. According to Judaism we are not tainted by original sin and therefore incapable of doing good without God's grace. To the contrary, we are a mix of good and evil and everything depends on our choice. Nor are we asked, humbly and passively, to accept the world as it is. That is not what the patriarchs and prophets did. They raged against the injustice of the world. They even argued with God Himself. God's reply was simple. *Hit-halekh lefanai*, "Walk on ahead of Me." I will show you what to do, but you must do it. The whole of Judaism is a call to responsibility - to God, His word and His world. Judaism is, par excellence, a religion of responsibility.

God asked great things of the Jewish people, and in so doing, made them

great. Perhaps that is also why He made the Jewish people small. There is a fascinating passage in the Book of Judges. Gideon is about to wage war against the Midianites. God tells him he will succeed. Gideon assembles an army of 32,000 men. God says: Too many. Gideon gets up and tells the people: Whoever wants to leave, should leave. 22,000 do so, leaving ten thousand men. God says: Still too many. Take the people, He says, to a river and see how they drink. Those who kneel down, send home. Those who raise the water in their hands, keep with you. Gideon does so. By now, only 300 men are left, an absurdly small force. Now, says God, go and fight. They do, and win.

If any story in the Bible tells us about the significance of Jewish smallness, it is this. To win the special battle in which you are engaged, says God, you do not need numbers. You need commitment, passion, dedication to a cause. Precisely because you are outnumbered, every individual will know that he or she counts; that each Jew carries an immense responsibility for the fate of Judaism and the Jewish people. Zechariah put it best: "Not by might nor by power but by My spirit, says the Almighty Lord." Physical strength needs numbers. The larger the nation, the more powerful it is. But when it comes to spiritual strength, you need not numbers but a sense of responsibility. You need a people, each of whom knows that he or she must contribute something to the human heritage, leaving the world better than it would have been had they not existed. The Jewish question is not, What can the world give me? It is, What can I give to the world? The Jewish story is a story of responsibility.

# A CONVERSATION WITH KARL MARX

IN ONE of the more famous passages of modern times, Karl Marx in 1844 delivered his verdict on religion. It is, he said:

*. . . the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*

Religion, Marx believed, was what reconciled people to their condition – their poverty, their disease and death, their 'station in life', their subjection to tyrannical rulers, the sheer bleakness of existence for most people most of the time. Faith anaesthetised. It made the otherwise unbearable, bearable. Things are as they are because that is the will of God. God made some people rich and others poor; some people rulers and the others ruled. Religion was the most powerful means ever devised for keeping people in their place and preserving the status quo. It robed their lives with ritual. It dignified their tears into prayer. It gave the social order metaphysical inevitability. So, if the world is to be changed, Marx concluded, religion must go:

*The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is at the same time the demand for their real happiness . . . Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains so that man may throw off the chains and pluck real flowers. Religion is only the illusory sun around which man revolves so long as he does not revolve around himself.*

Who is not wise with hindsight? And yet the deepest folly is not to avail oneself of hindsight. I want to say: Marx, what would you say now more than a century and a half later, knowing what we know, that the earthly

paradise you had in mind turned into one of the most brutal, repressive regimes in the history of mankind. Your dream of utopia ended in a nightmare of hell.

You were not Jewish, but your family was. You forgot, or perhaps you never knew, that Judaism is not a religion that reconciles us to the world. It was born as an act of protest against the great empires of the ancient world, Mesopotamia and Egypt, which did exactly what you accused all religions of doing – sanctifying hierarchy, justifying the rule of the strong over the weak, glorifying kings and pharaohs and keeping the masses in place. It was God who removed the chains of slavery from His people, not God who imposed them. It was Abraham, then Moses, then Amos, and then Isaiah, who fought on behalf of justice and human dignity – confronting priests and kings, even arguing with God Himself: "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?"

**"I remain in awe at the challenge God has set us."**

Opium of the people? Nothing was ever less an opiate than this religion of dissatisfaction with the status quo. When they asked Rabbi Chaim of Brisk what was the role of a rabbi, without hesitation he replied, "To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of his oppressor." When they asked Albert Einstein what his identity meant to him, he answered, "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence – these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it." Judaism is not the opium of the people. There are religions that which transport the believer to his or her private heaven. Not Judaism, which is the impassioned, sustained desire to bring heaven down to earth. Until we have done this, there is work still to do.

There are faiths that relieve mankind of responsibility. They transport us beyond the world of pain to bliss, nirvana, meditative rapture. They teach us



to accept the world as it is and ourselves as we are. There is nothing wrong with them. They have brought great peace of mind to many. But I remain in awe at the challenge God has set us: to be different, to be iconoclasts of the politically correct, to be God's question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the age, to build, to change, to 'mend' the world until it becomes a place worthy of the Divine presence because we have learned to honour the image of God that is mankind.

To be a Jew demands courage. Our faith is not for the faint-hearted. Its vision of the universe is anything but comfortable. However free or affluent or settled we are, on Pesach we eat the bread of affliction and taste the bitter herbs of slavery. On Sukkot we sit in shacks and know what it is to be homeless. On Shabbat we make our living protest against a society driven by ceaseless production and consumption. Every day in our prayers (Psalm 146) we speak of God who "brings justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry, who sets captives free and opens the eyes of the blind, who straightens the backs of those who are bent down . . . who watches over the stranger and gives heart to the orphan and the widow." To be a Jew is to be alert to the poverty, the suffering, the loneliness of others. Opium de-sensitises us to pain. Judaism sensitises us to it.

No Jew who has lived Judaism can be without a social conscience. To be a Jew is to accept responsibility. The world will not get better of its own accord. Nor will we make it a more human place by leaving it to others – to politicians, columnists, protestors, campaigners – making them our agents to bring redemption on our behalf. Judaism begins not with man's cry to God, but with God's cry to us, each of us, here where we are. "If you are silent at this time," says Mordechai to Esther, "relief and deliverance will come from somewhere else . . . but who knows whether it is not for such a time as this that you have attained

**"To be a Jew is to be alert to the poverty, the suffering, the loneliness of others."**

royalty?" That is the question Judaism poses to each of us. Yes, if we do not do it, someone else may. But we will then have failed to understand why we are here and what we are called on to do. Judaism is God's greatest ever call to human responsibility.

# EVERY CONTRIBUTION COUNTS

WHEN GOD told Moses to ask Jews to give, He added one lovely detail. *He-ashir lo yarbeh vehadal lo yam'it*. "The rich not more and the poor not less." Each one of us has a contribution to make, and every contribution counts.

There is a prayer we say after drinking a glass of water or anything else that requires the blessing of *shehakol*. It includes the words *bore nefashot rabbot ve-chesronan*, "who creates many kinds of soul and their deficiencies." This is a perplexing phrase. Why should we thank God for creating shortcomings? Surely we thank God for what we have, not for what we lack.

I once heard a marvellous explanation. If each of us lacked nothing, we would never need anyone else. We would be solitaries, complete in ourselves. The very fact that we are all different means that what I lack, someone else has, and what someone else lacks, I have. It is precisely our shortcomings that lead us to make marriages, form communities, and build societies. Judaism is not a religion of the solitary self, the soul in private communion with God. It is about the life we share and the things we create together. Our very uniqueness, said the rabbis, testifies to the greatness of God. "When a human being makes many coins in a single mint, they all turn out the same. God makes every individual in the same image – His image – and each turns out different." The fact that we are each different means that every one of us has something unique to give to the Jewish people and to the world.

In 1991, soon after I became Chief Rabbi, I was invited to a dinner to explain my vision of Jewish renewal. Present at the gathering was a distinguished judge, Sir Peter Taylor, later to become Lord Chief Justice and who died tragically young. I will never forget what he said to me after I had finished my remarks. "I like your vision, and I wish you success. But what will you do with a wicked old sinner like me?" I could not let the comment pass.

"A wicked old sinner? You have spent your life administering justice. You have brought great honour to the law – and law is a fundamental Jewish value. Not by accident are so many Jews lawyers, for we believe that when God revealed Himself to mankind He did so in the form of laws. Not only is this the basis of Judaism. We believe it is the basis of humanity as a whole. The administration of justice is one of the seven Noahide commands. So, says the Talmud, *kol dayan shedan din emet le-amitato*, 'Any judge who delivers a just verdict becomes a partner with the Holy One, blessed be He, in the work of creation.' How then can you call yourself a wicked old sinner?" He blushed and said that was the nicest thing anyone had ever said of him.

Most aspects of Judaism never change. They are the same whoever we are, whenever and wherever we live. The laws of kashrut are recognisably what they were two thousand years ago. Shabbat is Shabbat whether you are in Manchester, Moscow or Miami. There is, though, one aspect of Judaism that is given to each of us to fulfil in our own way: the businessman who honours her employees, the professional who develops a reputation for integrity and trust, the teacher who inspires in his pupils a love of learning, the member of a community who welcomes new arrivals and gives them hospitality – and yes, the judge who increases our respect for the law.

**"It is about the life we share and the things we create together."**

These things are not exclusively religious acts. They are judged by their effect, not by the specific motivation we bring to bear on them. That is why we do not make a *berakhah* over them. Yet they flow, as surely as do the rules of *halakhah*, from the value-system of Judaism. They come under broad halakhic categories such as *gemillat hassadim* (acts of compassion), *tzedakah* (an untranslatable combination of charity and social justice), and *hayashar vehatov* (the right and the good). Some commentators include them in the command *Kedoshim tihyu*, ("Be holy"). Others place them under the rubric of *vehalakhta biderakhav* (the command to "walk in God's ways"). When done by Jews as Jews, they become part of that overarching mitzvah called *kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctifying God's name). It is easy to define such acts. They increase respect for Judaism. They make other Jews proud to be Jews.

Thinking back across the years to that dinner I realised that we had not done enough to articulate this dimension of Judaism. Yet it is central to Jewish responsibility. We know that we are Jews when we are in shul, or eating a kosher meal, or lighting Shabbat candles, or reciting the Haggadah. But Judaism is not just a religion of holy moments set apart from everyday life. It is a faith that should infuse the very texture of everyday life. The Shabbat before Tisha be'Av we read the blazing first chapter of the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet denounces those who are punctilious in offering sacrifices, yet who defraud the innocent, neglect the poor, or abuse the weak. Judaism is not Judaism if we dissociate our duties to God from our duties to our fellow human beings; if we cultivate heaven only to disdain our responsibilities down here on earth.

**"I think of the Israeli youth groups who, during the Kosovo conflict, went to look after the children of the refugees."**

I think of the late Professor David Baum, one of Britain's leading paediatricians who, after developing new techniques that lowered infant mortality, decided that it was not enough to contribute to Britain. He worked on child care facilities in Brazil, Ethiopia and Thailand and then assisted the Russians in improving theirs. A passionate Zionist, David believed that Jews should help their neighbours, and so, in one of the last acts of his life, he created a paediatric unit for the Palestinians in Gaza. He died during a sponsored bicycle ride to raise funds for a child care centre he was building in Kosovo.

I think of the late Sue Burns who, because of a rare spinal condition, was condemned to live her all-too-short life confined to bed. Instead of accepting her fate, she turned her suffering into a source of blessing to others. She used her phone and computer terminal to set up a help-line for fellow sufferers.

When she was given a national honour for her work she became the first person to be carried into Buckingham Palace on a bed. She brought help to many, and I never heard her complain.

I think of the many Holocaust survivors in our community who, instead of burying their memories, have devoted their lives to being witnesses of what happened, so that we and the world should not forget. I think of the Israeli youth groups who, during the Kosovo conflict, went to look after the children of the refugees. I think of the eleven-year-old girl in our community, one of whose parents was severely handicapped, the other blind. Without thinking that what she was doing was exceptional, she did her schoolwork, ran the household, and looked after her father and mother. I think of the thousands of Jews throughout Britain who, quietly and without public recognition, sustain our welfare institutions, give help to those in need, or help the unemployed back to work. I think of those who visit the sick, bring comfort to mourners, offer hospitality to strangers or in some other way enrich our community life.

And I think of the story told by Yale law professor Stephen Carter. When he was a child he and his family moved to Washington, the first black family to live in that particular neighbourhood. He tells of how he and his family were systematically ignored by their neighbours until one woman saw them and gave a huge smile of welcome. Disappearing into her house, she re-appeared a few minutes later with a tray laden with food, which she brought over to Carter and his young brothers. That moment, he writes, rescued him from despair and gave him faith that he, a black, could belong. He adds that it was no coincidence that the woman was a Jew. She was practising, he writes, the Jewish tradition of *chesed*, the imperative of kindness. Carter's story reminds us that one act can change a life; and every life is a universe.

**"They show that faith counts, that it makes a difference, that it humanises an otherwise harsh and random world."**



These are examples of *kiddush ha-Shem*. They bring pride and honour to Judaism. They bring the Divine presence into the world. They show that faith counts, that it makes a difference, that it humanises an otherwise harsh and random world. Each is a living example of Jewish responsibility. They make a contribution, and every contribution counts.

# THE THIRD PROMISE

AND SO to the future. For ten years I have spoken about renewal and continuity. But we will not succeed in capturing the imagination unless we ask not just about the How of continuity but also the Why. Why are we here? Why are we Jews? To what destiny are we summoned? To what task are we called?

To answer that question we have to go back to the beginning, and to our book of beginnings, the book of *Bereishith*. Read the book carefully and you will see that it is about two promises. The first is the promise of children. You will have, says God to the grandparents of our people, many children – as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, the grains of sand on the sea shore. The second is the promise of a land. Time and again God tells Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that this land – the land of Canaan, later to become Israel – will one day be theirs. Promised children and a promised land: that is how the Jewish story begins.

Today, almost four thousand years later, those remain our overarching concerns. Will we have Jewish grandchildren? And when will Israel's neighbours recognise its right to exist? Jewish continuity and the security of the State of Israel - overwhelmingly, these are our dominant concerns today just as they were in the days of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Our hopes are theirs: promised children and a promised land. If ever we needed proof of the singularity of Jewish history it is here. Which nation born four thousand years ago exists today, speaking the same language, practising the same faith, exercised by the same concerns? I think of these things and tremble. Somehow our history is more than mere history. We are part of a story, surely the most remarkable ever told. Not for nothing did the Oxford literary historian A. L. Rowse write at the end of his last book, "If there is one honour in all the world that I should like, it would be to be an honorary Jewish citizen."



And yet, this cannot be all. Children and a land? Every nation has children and a land. The British, the French, the Italians, have children. The Dutch, the Spanish, the Belgians have a land. Can it be that what makes us Jews is simply that what is natural for everyone else is strangely difficult for us? That cannot be what made Jews and Judaism so influential, so vivid an intimation of God's presence in the world. There is, in the book of *Bereishith*, a third promise we sometimes forget. It occurs no less than five times in slightly different words. "Through you," says God, "all the nations of the world shall be blessed." It is not for you alone that I make this covenant. It is so that you will make a difference to the world. By the things you do, the way you live, the values you cherish, the kind of people you become, you will show others what it is to live in such a way as to honour the image of God that is mankind.

**"There is a connection between our inner life and our outer life."**

The book of *Bereishith* tells a story, one that however many times we read it remains disturbing, challenging, unconventional, strange. In the beginning God spoke to humanity as a whole. That is what the archetypal figures of Adam, Cain and Noah represent. In essence, He says: Here is My world. I give it to you. Name it, understand it, master it, but also value it, protect it, enhance it. You are My trustees. You do not own creation. You are mere temporary residents on the surface of infinity. But I have handed the world to you as its guardians. Build; do not destroy. Protect; do not kill. Join your separate lonelinesses to one another in families, communities and societies that honour the freedom and dignity of the human person. For it is not in you alone that I have set My image, but also in other people. When you recognise the sanctity of the other, you will recognise Me – the supreme Other - and thus bring My presence from heaven down to earth.

One by one these efforts fail. Adam sins. Cain kills. Noah saves his family but not his generation. Thereafter God says, there must be another way. So

He chooses, first an individual, then a family, then a tribe, then a collection of tribes, and says: be different. Be an example. Become My witnesses. Live as I would like humanity to live. Not precisely, because after Babel there are many languages, many cultures and civilisations, each with its own distinctive character. There is no longer – and will not be until the end of history – a single universal way of living out the fundamental truths of the human condition. But you, My people, will be the most vivid embodiment of those universal truths. Your history will tell a story that is the human story in a singularly transparent form: what it is to journey from slavery to freedom, to construct a society built on justice and compassion, to build families and communities that honour the independence and interdependence of the human person.

I have set you a difficult task. It will not be easy to live as people must live if they are to create a gracious world. I will give you many rules, some of which you will understand, others of which will remain opaque until you understand more than you do today. Nor will the nations among whom you live always appreciate your presence. Your very difference will be a threat to those who seek to impose a single truth on the diversity I have made. You will be a standing rebuke to empires and imperialism; therefore you will be taken as their target. I weep that this is so. But do not blame Me. I did not make Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. Still less did I tell Christians and Muslims, who trace their very ancestry and faith to you, to oppose you. It was not My voice that Christians heard when they persecuted Jews for a thousand years in Europe. It is not My voice that radical Islamists hear today when they bring terror to My holy land. The wise of these faiths know this, that without you there would not be them. But I give you My promise that you will outlive all those who try to destroy you, as you have outlived every empire of the ancient world. For it is not for you alone that I have called you into being, given you My covenant and taught you a Torah – a teaching – of life. By being true to yourself, your faith and heritage, all the nations of the world shall be blessed.



And so it has been. More than most, whether they are religious or not, observant or not, learned or not, Jews have instinctively known that we are here to make a difference, to give, to contribute, to exercise responsibility. In business, they have created prosperity. In medicine, they have sought to cure hitherto incurable disease. In academic life they have widened the horizons of human understanding. In law they have pursued justice. In countless voluntary organisations and philanthropic causes, they have endeavoured to give society a more human face for those who need our help. There is a connection between our inner life and our outer life. On our holiest days we speak of three things, *teshuvah*, repentance, *tefillah*, prayer and *tsedakah*, charity and social justice. *Teshuvah*, our dialogue with ourselves, leads to prayer, our dialogue with God, which leads to *tzedakah*, our concern for others. We climb the ladder to heaven, says Maimonides, only to return to earth to perform acts of kindness, justice and righteousness "for in these I delight, says the Lord." To be a Jew is to be a blessing to others – to our fellow Jews and to mankind.

**" I want to shift a paradigm that has divided the Jewish people for two hundred years."**

And so it has been with Israel. It is tragic that we should be called on today to defend the existence of a State brought into being by the United Nations, a nation that has wanted nothing more in the 53 years of its existence than to make peace with its neighbours and share its prosperity with them. No other country of comparable size and age has done what Israel has done: plant forests, make the desert bloom, develop an economy that is one of the most advanced in the world, and provide a home for refugees throughout the world. How many of the more than a hundred nations created since the Second World War can point today to a free press, an active democracy and an independent judiciary, sustained in the face of ceaseless external threat? Which has done more to bring agricultural, medical and technological help to other countries, or humanitarian relief to the people of Bosnia and Kosovo and the victims of the Turkish earthquake

disaster. At the World Economic Forum in Davos this year, I found myself sharing a platform with the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, who told me that such was the gratitude of his people that one of the families of his congregation had named their baby, born during the conflict, 'Israel' as a gesture of thanks. If there were justice in the world of international affairs, Israel today would be a role model for developing countries. Through it, many nations would be blessed. We are not yet living in such a world. But a nation that has expected its messiah daily for more than 2,000 years knows what it is to wait without giving up hope.

The challenge I want to share with our community is Jewish responsibility. In so doing, I want to shift a paradigm that has divided the Jewish people for two hundred years. Ever since Jews emerged from the ghetto, consciously or tacitly they have asked a question. What shall now be our identity, our task? Are we particularists or universalists? Are we concerned with ourselves or with the world? The answers they gave divided the Jewish world in two. There were those who were particularists. They turned inward, building strong families, communities, schools and houses of study. They kept their contacts with the outside to a minimum. They chose the way of segregation. Others became universalists. They spoke of *Or la-goyim* ("a light to the nations") or *Tikkun olam* ("perfecting the world"). Especially in the nineteenth century, those who chose this route simultaneously divested themselves of everything that made Jews particular and different. They opposed Jewish schools. They abandoned kashrut, the prohibitions of Shabbat, and much else that made Jewish life unique. They wanted to be like everyone else, only more so. They did great things, but they carried integration to the point of assimilation. Much of the story of modern Jewry can be told in terms this dichotomy.

It is wrong at its very roots. Jews are not called on to choose between particularism and universalism. We are called on to be both. Indeed we cannot successfully be one without the other. If there is nothing particular (singular, unique) about Jewish life then there is nothing unique we have to



contribute to the project of mankind. If Jewish families are not special, there is nothing special we can teach about the family. If we fail to keep Shabbat, in vain will we search for something to say about the limits of commercialism and the exploitation of the environment. If we are the same as everyone else, ipso facto we have nothing special to communicate to anyone else. Only by using the unique expressive power of Elizabethan English could Shakespeare enhance the world with his sonnets and dramas. Only by drawing on the full resources of French painting could Monet paint his late canvasses that today draw crowds in every country they are shown. Only by being true as Jews to our Jewish faith can we be a blessing to others. What makes us different is what provides us with something to different to give. Our particularity is our universality.

**"Jews are not called on to choose between particularism and universalism. We are called on to be both."**

Jews contributed more than most to the spiritual, ethical heritage of the West because they had the courage to be different. To put it in 21st century terms, Judaism is the refusal to accept globalisation, if that means riding roughshod over local traditions in the name of a Coca-Cola MTV culture that reduces us all to the status of consumers obedient to the dictates of multinational corporations. The biblical name for globalisation – a world of "one language and a common speech" – is Babel. It was not good news then; it is not good news now. Jews are the world's oldest global people. For two thousand years our ancestors were scattered over the face of the earth, yet they saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation. We know what it is to be global and yet respect diversity. Our whole history has been a tutorial in the dignity of difference.

In ages of tradition, people respect tradition. It is there because it worked. It is the past's legacy to the future. Its very survival is its justification. So it was in many ages of Jewish history. Jews were Jews because that is what their parents and grandparents were and because that is what God commanded

them to be. Our classic literature is full of questions, but "Why be Jewish?" was rarely one of them. We live today in an untraditional, even anti-traditional age, and that is both a challenge and an opportunity. It invites us to ask the question "Why?" and thus remind ourselves of what Judaism really is and what it calls on us to be. In *Radical Then, Radical Now* I have given my answer that question, moving on from the question, "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?" to "Why should we want – and the world need - Jewish grandchildren?"

I want us therefore to raise our sights as a community. For ten years we have built Jewish schools, revived communities, enhanced adult education and given British Jewish life a vibrancy it has rarely had. Those are wondrous achievements and they are yours. It would be tempting to say that there is nothing more to say – that we should keep on doing what we are doing, only more so. But I fear that if this is all, we will fail to rise to the unique challenge presented by the existence of the State of Israel and the hearing given to the Jewish voice in the liberal democracies of the West. We will survive. But Jews do not survive in order to survive. In the first words of God to Abraham – words that set our history into motion – He said two words that still reverberate across the centuries: *Vehyeh berakhah*. "Be a blessing." There is a myriad of ways in which a life can be a blessing; no two are the same. Each of us has gifts, talents, abilities, opportunities that are shared by no one else, and we are called on to share them with others in ways only we can decide. God gave us the raw materials – life, our situation in time and space, and freewill – and it is up to us, under His tutelage, to turn them into a source of blessing. That is the challenge of Jewish responsibility.

Over the years I have been struck by the fact that non-Jews sometimes understand us better than we understand ourselves. We are not just an ethnicity, a culture, a minority struggling to sustain itself. I think of Tolstoy who said, "The Jew is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire, and has illumined with it the entire world." Or Matthew Arnold: "As long as the world lasts, all who want to make progress in



righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration, as to the people who have had the sense for righteousness most glowing and strongest." Or the contemporary Catholic writer Michael Novak who wrote to his daughter: "Always have a special reverence for Jews. More than any others they are the carriers of the deepest mysteries of the human race, the people whom God chose." Or another Catholic, Thomas Cahill: "For better or worse, the role of the West in humanity's history is singular. Because of this, the role of the Jews, the inventors of Western culture, is also singular: there is simply no one else remotely like them; theirs is a unique vocation." Or the journalist Andrew Marr who wrote in The Observer (14 May 2000), "The Jews have always had their stories for the rest of us . . . [They] really have been different; they have enriched the world and challenged it."

These are voices reminding us of what our ancestors knew: that to be a Jew is a privilege and a source of pride. Yes, we are sometimes fractious. Yes, there are many things in our faith that, in this radically individualistic age, we struggle to understand. And yes, Judaism is a demanding faith. It is not an easy ride. Those who try to convince us otherwise do our heritage a great disservice. Judaism is not political correctness wearing a yarmulkah. It does not mean going with the flow, floating with the tide, making a *berakhah* over every passing fashion, this year's lifestyle, next week's trend. To be a Jew is to have the courage to be different. But it is also to be a blessing to others. That is why I want us to move from renewal to responsibility. By being what only we are, we give humanity what only we can give.

**"To be a Jew is to have the courage to be different. But it is also to be a blessing to others."**

# AN OPEN LETTER TO BRITISH JEWRY

THIS, THEN, is my open letter to British Jewry. We have done much to renew our community. Let us now turn Jewish renewal into Jewish responsibility.

There is, in Jewish life today, a clear and present danger. Israel, travestied throughout the world, may conclude that it has no friends; that it is and will always remain alone. Diaspora Jewry, suffering the impact of outmarriage and disaffiliation, may conclude that the only way to survive is to rebuild the walls of an imaginary ghetto and dissociate itself from the rest of society. The Jewish people may turn inward, seeing only enemies – physical and spiritual – outside. That would be a failure to understand the Jewish story.

Our task is to be true to our faith and a blessing to others: a blessing to others because we are true to our faith. To be a Jew is to bring redemption, one day at a time, one act at a time. Every mitzvah, every kind word or deed, every act of sharing what we have with others, brings the Divine presence into the world. That is neither mysterious nor mystical. By recognising the image of God in other people, we help to remake the world in the image of God.

**"Our task is to be true to our faith and a blessing to others."**

Rarely has the Jewish presence been more widely respected, and rarely has it been more necessary. Western society is losing the values we hold dear: marriage, parenthood, community, responsibility, the sanctity of human life, the dignity of difference, self-restraint and the willingness to make sacrifices in pursuit of high ideals. Moral scepticism has reduced 'I ought' to 'I want.' The most commercialised culture in the history of the world has invented one of the strangest concepts ever known to mankind: 'retail therapy' – the idea that we find happiness in what we buy (until tomorrow, when we discover that we have to buy something else). Never before have children been given materially more and spiritually less. Our tradition is bigger than this, more serious, more humane, more real. We know in our heart of hearts that what really brings happiness, what makes a life worthwhile, is giving to others. That is the great difference between material goods and spiritual goods. With material goods, the more we share, the less we have. With spiritual goods – kindness, friendship, generosity, compassion – the more we share the more we have. The more we give, the more we grow.

That is why I want to encourage our community to add to the message of renewal an emphasis on responsibility. There is no one way of doing this. It may vary from community to community, from one organisation to another, from one individual to the next. But it means turning our Judaism outwards toward our fellow Jews and our fellow humans. It means challenging young Jews to give service to the community. It means each synagogue strengthening its welfare services. It means that each of us should ask, not, What does the Jewish community do for me?, but What am I doing for the Jewish community? These are the things that change our lives because we have helped to make the world more gracious or less lonely for someone else.

**"The more we give, the more we grow."**

Jewish responsibility also means using our gifts to beautify our faith. We need poets, novelists and journalists to write the Jewish word; musicians to re-orchestrate the Jewish song; film-makers and television producers to tell the story of our people – of how Jews live, not just how they died. We need our best minds to create a new dialogue between Judaism and the ideas and scientific discoveries of our time.

Jewish responsibility means carrying our identity into the public domain, living by Jewish values in our work, our careers and our interactions with others. Many Jews feel awkward about this. They still believe, as did Jews in the nineteenth century, that one should be "a person in the street and a Jew at home." I believe, to the contrary, that non-Jews respect Jews who respect

Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed about Judaism.

Jewish responsibility also means strengthening our links with the State and people of Israel, not necessarily politically but existentially. For Israel to be there for us, we must be there for it. We need to send yet more of our young people there to study and work. We need to form more partnerships with Israeli institutions to train our rabbis and teachers. We need to intensify our efforts throughout the educational system to ensure that every Jew speaks Ivrit. To be part of a people means being able to speak the language of that people. That once meant Yiddish or Ladino. Today it means Ivrit.

Judaism is about creating spiritual energy: the energy that, if used for the benefit of others, changes lives and begins to change the world. God is our bridge across the abyss that separates me from you, one person from the next. If I learn Torah rightly, then I will want to teach it. If I pray for what I need, I will become aware of what other people need. If I thank God for what He has given me, I will know that He wants me to give part of it to others. Those are litmus-paper tests for knowing whether we are on the right or wrong track. Jewish spirituality is not a private starburst of the soul. Jewish life is not the search for personal salvation. It is a restless desire to change the world into a place in which God can feel at home. There are a thousand ways in which we help to do this, and each is precious, one not more so than another.

I once asked the non-Jewish historian Paul Johnson, who wrote a fine *History of the Jews*, what struck him most in his encounter with Judaism. He gave a remarkable reply. Jews, he said, have managed better than anyone else the delicate balance between responsibility for myself and responsibility for others. There have been individualistic cultures – the Renaissance was one, the contemporary West is another. There have been collectivist cultures – the former Soviet Union is an obvious example. Both, carried to an extreme, are disasters, but the balance between them is very difficult to achieve. That is what Jews have done, not once but throughout their history. They are personally responsible. They know that God will help, but first I have to do



my part. But they are also collectively responsible. They care about community. They come to the rescue of others. When someone needs help, they are among the first to be there. That is a very rare achievement, he said, and it is what I admire most about the Jews. It was a lovely answer, and a true one. Hillel said it first and best: "If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I?" Those two sentences are the twin axes of the Jewish soul.

I love Judaism. To me it is the most humane and humanising faith in the lexicon of the spirit. We can sometimes be an exasperating people, but the vision of what we are called on to be has never ceased to inspire me, and the more I search, the more I am inspired. I know how small I am and how inadequate to the tasks God has set me. Even the greatest Jew of all time, Moses, began his conversation with God with the words, "Who am I?" But it is not we who start by being equal to the challenge; it is the challenge that makes us equal to it. We are as big as our ideals. The higher they are, the taller we stand. God asked great things of the Jewish people, and by asking, made our people great.

If I have learned anything in the past ten years it has been this: that when Jews give, when they share, when they say, "If this is wrong, let me be among the first to help put it right," they create moments, lives of such moral beauty that they tower above anything else in the contemporary landscape. Judaism is God's call to responsibility. May we, in the years to come, be able to say: we heard, we responded, we gave, we grew. By writing others, we write ourselves, into the Book of Life.

**"Judaism is God's call to responsibility."**

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המלאכה
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*office* of the
CHIEF RABBI

Adler House 735 High Road London N12 0US
Tel: 020 8343 6301 Fax: 020 8343 6310
info@chiefrabbi.org www.chiefrabbi.org