



JONATHAN SACKS

Contents

Introduction

1. The Way of Identity: On Being a Jew
 2. The Way of Prayer: Speaking to God
 3. The Way of Study: Listening to God
 4. The Way of *Mitzvot*: Responding to God
 5. The Way of *Tzedakah*: Love as Justice
 6. The Way of *Chessed*: Love as Compassion
 7. The Way of Faith: Love as Loyalty
 8. The Way of Israel: The Jewish Land
 9. The Way of *Kiddush Hashem*: The Jewish Task
 10. The Way of Responsibility: The Jewish Future
- Epilogue: Why I am a Jew

Susi Bradfield z"l, 1929-2007

This booklet is dedicated in memory of Susi Bradfield z"l, an exceptional daughter, sister, wife, mother and communal leader and a true Eshet Chayil. In the words of the Chief Rabbi; her life embodied "*chein, chessed ve-rachamim*" grace, loving kindness and compassion.

Susi was tirelessly involved all her life in Jewish and Israeli charities and especially WIZO where she was the co-chair of WIZO's Fundraising Committee for twenty years and inspired the Susi Bradfield Woman's Educators Fellowship at the London School of Jewish Studies.

Introduction

‘Seek God where He is to be found, call Him when He is close.’ The sages were puzzled by this verse. When is God *not* close? Surely God is everywhere. Their answer was profound. *God is always close to us, but we are not always close to God.* When are we close? ‘During the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.’

Why is God close on these days? Because it is then, asking to be written in the book of life, we reflect most deeply on our own life. What have I achieved? What have I failed to achieve? What did I do wrong? How can I put it right? What am I here to do?

Whether we believe, or don’t believe, these are religious questions. Science can tell us how life began, but it can never tell us what life is for. Anthropology can tell us the many ways in which people have lived, but it can never tell us how we should live. Economics and business studies can tell us how to generate wealth, but they cannot tell us what to do with the wealth we have made.

The various sciences, natural, social or human, can tell us how, but not why. The ‘why’ questions ask us to lift up our eyes beyond the immediate, in search of the ultimate. The name we give to the ultimate ultimate is God. The search for meaning is the religious quest, and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it reaches its greatest intensity.

God is always close to us, but we are not always close to God. How then do we come close to Him? By living Jewishly. ‘We will do, then we will understand’, said our ancestors at Mount Sinai. So it is in all matters of the soul. We learn to love music by listening to music. We learn to be generous by performing acts of generosity. ‘The heart follows the deed’. Don’t expect to have faith or find God by waiting for Him to find us. We have to begin the journey. Then God meets us halfway.

There are many ways of finding God, many paths to the Divine presence. In this anthology I have chosen ten of the most important, one for each of the days from the start of Rosh Hashanah to the end of Yom Kippur. The first is *identity*. We are born into a family that has a history. Who are we? To which story do we belong?

The second is *prayer*, the most focused way in which we reach out to God. Third is *study*, the highest of all Jewish acts, which the sages said was more holy even than prayer. Fourth is *mitzvot*, the way of the

commands. In prayer we find God by speaking; in study we find God in listening; in *mitzvot* we find God by doing.

Then come the three great attributes of the Jewish personality: *tzedakah*, love as justice; *chessed*, love as compassion; and *emunah*, love as loyalty. Judaism is a religion of love, not the mystical, otherworldly love that hovers above the world, leaving its imperfections intact, but the love that engages with the world, trying – one act at a time, one day at a time, one life at a time – to make it a little less cruel, a little more human and humane.

Then, lastly, come the three great expressions of Jewish life: *Israel*, the one place on earth where Jews have the chance to do what every other nation takes for granted, namely the right to rule ourselves and create a society in accordance with our beliefs; *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name in the world by acting as God's ambassadors; and lastly *Jewish responsibility*, the idea that we are God's partners in the work of creation, and there is work for each of us to do in this tense and troubled age.

This is not a sequential book; it is an anthology of readings, any of which may be the starting point of a personal meditation, framed by such questions as: How does this apply to me? How can I act on it in the year to come? Some may not speak to you, others will. For there are as many ways to the Divine presence as there are Jews, said Rav Nachman of Bratslav. Or as I put it: Where *what we want to do* meets *what needs to be done*, that is where God wants us to be.

There are many ways to God. Where we begin doesn't matter, so long as we begin. Jewish life is the circumference of a circle at whose centre is God. That is where we meet, whatever our starting point.

However long we live, life is short, too short. Every day matters. Every day in which we do not do some good deed, take some step toward God, make some difference to the world, is a day wasted – and our days on earth are too few to waste even one. May God bless you in the coming year, and may He bless us all, with peace, with health, with happiness, with life.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

1

The Way of Identity: On Being a Jew

Uniquely, Jews are born into a faith. It chooses us before we choose it. Physically we come naked into the world, but spiritually we come with a gift: the story of our past, of our parents and theirs through forty centuries from the day Abraham and Sarah first heard the call of God and began their journey to a land, a promise, a destiny and a vocation. That story is ours.

It is a strange and moving story. It tells of how a family, then a collection of tribes, then a nation, were summoned to be God's ambassadors on earth. They were charged with building a society unlike any other, based not on wealth or power but on justice and compassion, the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of human life – a society that would honour the world as God's work and the human person as God's image.

This was and is a demanding task, yet Judaism remains a realistic religion. It assumed from the outset that transforming the world would take many generations – hence the importance of handing on our ideals to the next generation. It takes many gifts, many different kinds of talent – hence the importance of Jews as a people. None of us has all the gifts but each of us has some. We all count; we each have a unique contribution to make. We come before God as a people, each giving something, each lifted by the contributions of others.

And yes, at times we fail or fall short – hence the importance of *teshuvah*, repentance, apology, forgiveness, re-dedication. Judaism is bigger than any of us, yet it is made by all of us. And though Jews were and are a tiny people, today a mere fifth of a per cent of the population of the world, we have made a contribution to civilization out of all proportion to our numbers.

Who are we, and what are we called on to do?

🔥 *Genesis: The Call*

The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you

will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all families on earth will be blessed through you.’ (Gen. 12 : 1-3)

☞ *Genesis: The Way of the Lord*

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. (Gen. 18 : 18-19)

☞ *The Covenant at Sinai: A Holy Nation*

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19: 4-6)

☞ *Moses: A people of history*

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4: 32-34)

☞ *Isaiah: A light to the nations*

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Is. 42: 6-7)

☞ *Dust and the stars*

‘I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heaven and the sand on the seashore’ (Gen. 22: 17). Rabbi Judah bar Ilai explained: This people is compared to dust and to the stars. When it sinks, it sinks to the dust, but when it rises, it rises to the stars.

‘I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth’ (Gen. 13: 16). As the dust of the earth is from one end of the world to the other, so your children will be dispersed from one end of the world to the other. As dust is trodden on by all, so will your children be trodden on by the peoples of the world. As dust outlives all vessels of metal while it endures for ever, so all the peoples of the earth will cease to be, while Israel endures for ever.

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 16a.

🌀 *Like fragrant oil*

‘Your name is like fragrant oil poured out’ (Song of Songs 1: 3): As oil brings light to the world, so Israel brings light to the world, as it is said, ‘Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn’ (Isaiah 60: 3).

Song of Songs Rabbah, 1: 3: 2.

🌀 *Saadia Gaon*

Our nation is a nation only in virtue of its Torah.

Saadai Gaon, *Emunot veDeot* (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions), 3:7.

🌀 *Judah Halevi*

Israel is to the nations as the heart is to the limbs of the body.

Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*: II: 36.

🌀 *Loyalty to God*

Devoid of power, splendour, bereft of the brilliant show of human grandeur, Israel was upheld by its faithfulness toward the All-One . . . Other states, everywhere, in all the glory of human power and arrogance, disappeared from the face of the earth, while Israel, though devoid of might and splendour, lived on because of its loyalty to God and His Law.

Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, 64.

🌀 *Hope in Failure*

Despair and resignation were unknown to the man of the covenant who found triumph in defeat, hope in failure, and who could not conceal God’s

Word that was, to paraphrase Jeremiah, deeply implanted in his bones and burning in his heart like an all-consuming fire.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 112.

☞ *The ennoblement of the human race*

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.

Albert Einstein, *As I See It*, p. 103.

☞ *Bigger than our numbers*

Each of us Jews knows how thoroughly ordinary he is; yet taken together, we seem caught up in things great and inexplicable . . . The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet we remain bigger than our numbers. Big things seem to happen around us and to us.

Milton Himmelfarb, *Jews and Gentiles*, 141-142.

☞ *Looking outward*

We have become altogether too inward-looking, with our horizons largely limited within the ghetto-walls we have erected to separate us from the rest of our people and from the human society beyond . . . Preoccupied with the burning problems of our own survival, we have lost sight with our assignment as a light unto the nations.

Lord Jakobovits, *The Timely and the Timeless*, 96-97.

☞ *Remaking the world*

For forty centuries, Jews have held tenaciously to the belief that we have been charged with a sacred mission: to sanctify life by being God's ambassadors to a world that has all too often worshipped the multiple forms of what Nietzsche called 'the will to power'. We were called on to write a different story, that tells of the beauty of holiness and the call of compassion: 'to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.'

Judaism has placed at the centre of its striving some of the most healing of all sacred imperatives: the importance of love and loyalty; marriage and the sacred bonds between husband and wife, parent and child; education and the life of the mind; justice, equity and the rule of law; compassion, charity and human dignity; the bonds of belonging and

community; memory, history and imperishable hope. We seek God not just in the remote heavens or the innermost recesses of the soul but in ordinary life, with its pleasures and pains, fears and hopes, conflicts and consolations. Judaism believes not in abandoning earth for the sake of heaven, but in bringing fragments of heaven down to earth in simple deeds and celebrations.

For that is where God is found. Not in wealth, power, fame, success, or any other of the myriad substitutes for life, still less in violence and terror, but in life itself: living, breathing (*neshamah*, the Hebrew word for soul, means ‘breathing’), loving, giving, caring, praying, praising, giving thanks, defeating tragedy in the name of hope, and death in the name of life.

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. By recognising the image of God in other people, we help to remake the world in the image of God.

Jonathan Sacks

Prayer

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the Universe, help me live my people’s destiny, as an heir to the covenant our ancestors made with You at Sinai. May I honour our people’s past and help build our people’s future.

2

The Way of Prayer: Speaking to God

Prayer is our intimate dialogue with Infinity, the profoundest expression of our faith that at the heart of reality is a Presence that cares, a God who listens, a creative Force that brought us into being in love. It is this belief more than any other that redeems life from solitude and fate from tragedy. The universe has a purpose. We have a purpose. However infinitesimal we are, however brief our stay on earth, we matter. The universe is more than particles of matter endlessly revolving in indifferent space. The human person is more than an accidental concatenation of genes blindly replicating themselves. Human life is more than 'A tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Prayer gives meaning to existence.

It is possible to believe otherwise. There can be a life without faith or prayer, just as there can be a life without love, or laughter, or happiness, or hope. But it is a diminished thing, lacking dimensions of depth and aspiration. Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am.' Judaism says, 'I pray, therefore I am not alone.'

It takes courage to believe. Jews need no proof of the apparent injustice of events. It is written on the pages of our history. Jews had no power or earthly glory. For the better part of forty centuries our ancestors lived dispersed throughout the world, without a home, without rights, all too often experiencing persecution and pain. All they had was an invisible God and the line connecting us to Him: the siddur, the words of prayer. All they had was faith. And in Judaism, we do not analyze our faith, we pray it. We do not philosophise about truth: we sing it, davven it. For Judaism, faith becomes real when it becomes prayer.

In prayer we speak to a presence vaster than the unfathomable universe yet closer to us than we are to ourselves: the God beyond who is also the Voice within. Though language must fail when we try to describe a Being beyond all parameters of speech, yet language is all we have, and it is enough. For God who made the world with creative words, and who revealed His will in holy words, listens to our prayerful words. Language is the bridge that joins us to Infinity.

In prayer God becomes not a theory but a Presence, not a fact but a mode of relationship. Prayer is where God meets us, in the human heart, in our offering of words, in our acknowledged vulnerability.

🌀 ***Rabbi Eleazar's Prayer: Love and Fellowship***

May it be your will, O Lord our God,
to cause to dwell in our lot
Love, fellowship, peace and friendship,
to widen our boundaries through disciples,
to prosper our goal with hope and with future,
to appoint us a share in the garden of Eden,
to direct us in your world
through good companions and good impulse,
That we may rise in the morning and find
Our heart awake to fear your name.

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 16b.

🌀 ***Rabbi Judah Halevi: Where shall I find You?***

Lord, where shall I find You?
High and hidden is Your place.
And where shall I not find You?
Your glory fills infinities of space . . .

I have sought Your presence
called You with all my heart,
And going out to meet You
I found You coming toward me.

From a poem by Judah Halevi, *Selected poems of Judah Halevi*, 134.

🌀 ***Rabbi Shlomo ibn Gabirol: Before I was Born***

Before I was born, Your love enveloped me.
You turned nothing into substance, and created me.
Who etched out my frame? Who poured
Me into a vessel and moulded me?
Who breathed a spirit into me? Who opened
The womb of Sheol and extracted me?
Who has guided me from youth-time until now?
Taught me knowledge, and cared wondrously for me?
Truly, I am nothing but clay within Your hand.

It is You, not I, who have really fashioned me.
I confess my sin to You, and do not say
That a serpent intrigued, and tempted me.
How can I conceal from You my faults, since
Before I was born Your love enveloped me.

R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol, 'Before I was Born', in
David Goldstein, *The Jewish Poets of Spain*, 97.

✧ ***Rabbi Eliezer Azikri: In my heart I will build a sanctuary***

In my heart I will build a sanctuary
To God's glorious splendour,
And in the sanctuary I will raise an altar
To the radiance of His majesty.
As fire I will take
The fire of the Binding,
And as a sacrifice I will offer Him
My undivided soul.

Adapted from R. Eliezer Azikri, *Sefer Charedim*

✧ ***Lord and King of Peace***

Lord and King of Peace,
Who makes peace and creates all things:
Help all of us that we may always hold fast to the attribute of peace,
So that true and abundant peace prevail between man and man, between
husband and wife,
And no strife separate humankind even in thought.
You make peace in Your heaven, You bring contrary elements together:
Extend abundant peace to us and to the whole world,
So that all discords be resolved in great love and peace,
And with one mind, one heart, all come near to You and Your law in truth,
And all form one union to do Your will with a whole heart.
Lord of peace, bless us with peace.

R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Tefillot*, I, 95.

✧ ***The Music of prayer***

There are people who cannot understand prayer and its effect on the soul.
The Baal Shem Tov explained this by way of a parable. He said: There
was once a musician who played so beautifully that those who heard him
stopped and began to dance. Once a deaf man came along. He saw all the

people dancing but he could not hear the music. He thought they were all mad.

🌀 *Work and prayer*

Rabbi Nachman of Kossov taught that we should always have God in our thoughts. 'But how', asked a disciple, 'can we think of God while we are engaged in business?' The rabbi replied: 'If we can think of business when we are praying, then we can think of praying when we are doing business.'

🌀 *Welcome Back*

Once Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev walked over to a group of his disciples after prayers had ended and welcomed them: '*Shalom aleikhem.*' The disciples were surprised and asked the Rebbe what he meant. They hadn't been away. 'I was speaking', he said, 'not to your bodies but your minds. I saw that while you were praying, you were thinking about other things. Your bodies were here but your minds were far away. Now that they have returned, I wished them *Shalom aleikhem.*'

🌀 *Inspiration*

One day some American visitors came to the synagogue in Shaarei Chessed, Jerusalem, where the great sage R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach prayed. Their nine-year-old son, standing behind R. Auerbach, said the Amidah so slowly and intently that the rabbi was unable to take three steps backward until the boy was finished. After the service the father apologised to the rabbi for the inconvenience. 'On the contrary', said R. Shlomo Zalman, 'I would like to thank your son for the inspiration of his devotion.'

Adapted from Hanoch Teller, *And from Jerusalem His Word*, 256-57.

🌀 *At one with creation*

All beings long for the very source of their origin. Every plant, every grain of sand, every clod of earth, small creatures and great, the heavens and the angels, every substance and its particles – all of them are longing, yearning, panting to attain the state of holy perfection. Human beings suffer constantly from this homesickness of the soul, and it is in prayer that we cure it. When praying, we feel at one with the whole creation, and raise it to the very source of blessing and life.

Rav Abraham Kook, *Olat Hariyah*, Commentary on the Prayerbook.

☞ *Is prayer answered?*

Is prayer answered? If God is changeless, how can we change Him by what we say? Even discounting this, why do we need to articulate our requests? Surely God, who sees the heart, knows our wishes even before we do, without our having to put them into words. What we wish to happen is either right or wrong in the eyes of God. If it is right, God will bring it about even if we do not pray. If it is wrong, God will not bring it about even if we do. So why pray?

The classic Jewish answer is simple but profound. Without a vessel to contain a blessing, there can be no blessing. If we have no receptacle to catch the rain, the rain may fall, but we will have none to drink. If we have no radio receiver, the sound-waves will flow, but we will be unable to convert them into sound. God's blessings flow continuously, but unless we make ourselves into a vessel for them, they will flow elsewhere. Prayer is the act of turning ourselves into a vehicle for the Divine. Prayer changes the world because it changes us.

Jonathan Sacks, Introduction to the *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*

☞ *Prayer*

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the universe, help me pray from the heart. Hear my words, my thanks, my hopes, my fears. Teach me to speak honestly and to listen attentively.

3

The Way of Study: Listening to God

Jews are the ‘people of the book’. Talmud Torah – studying Torah – is the greatest of all the commands and the secret of Jewish continuity. In the Shema we are commanded, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your might.’ Then almost immediately it says, ‘Teach these things repeatedly to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise.’ Judaism is a religion of education.

Study is holier even than prayer, for in prayer we speak to God, but in study we listen to God. We strive to understand what God wants from us. We try to make His will ours. For the holiest thing is God’s word. The Torah – God’s word to our ancestors – is our constitution as a nation, our covenant of liberty, the code by which we decipher the mystery and meaning of life.

The words of the Torah span a thousand years, from Moses to Malachi, the first and last of the prophets. For another thousand years, until the completion of the Babylonian Talmud, Jews added commentaries to the Book, and for another thousand years they wrote commentaries to the commentaries. Never has there been a deeper relationship between a people and a book. The ancient Greeks, puzzled by the phenomenon of an entire people dedicated to learning, called Jews ‘a nation of philosophers’. Certainly we are called on to be a nation of students and teachers. In Judaism we not only learn to live; we live to learn. In study, we make Torah real in the mind so that we can make it actual in the world.

How I love Your law

Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long.

How sweet are your words to my taste,

sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Your word is a lamp to my feet

and a light for my path.

Your statutes are my heritage forever;

they are the joy of my heart.

The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.
Your statutes are forever right;
give me understanding that I may live. (Psalm 119: 97, 103, 105, 111,
130, 144)

🌀 ***Your children's peace.***

All your children will be taught of the Lord,
and great will be your children's peace. (Isaiah 54:13)

🌀 ***The testimony of Josephus***

Should any one of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls.

Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, ii, 177-78

🌀 ***The world's first universal education system***

H. G. Wells noted in his Outline of History that 'The Jewish religion, because it was a literature-sustained religion, led to the first efforts to provide elementary education for all children in the community.' Universal compulsory education did not exist in England until 1870; it existed in Israel eighteen centuries earlier. This Talmudic passage gives a thumbnail history of how it evolved.

May the name of Joshua ben Gamla be remembered for good, for were it not for him, the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. For at first if a child had a father, his father taught him, and if he had no father he did not learn at all. Then they made an ordinance that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem. Even then, however, if a child had a father, the father would take him to Jerusalem to have him taught, but if not, the child would not go. They then ordained that teachers should be appointed in every district, and boys would enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. But then, if the teacher punished a child, the child would rebel and leave school. Eventually Joshua ben Gamla came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven.

Abridged from Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 21a.

☞ *The three crowns*

With three crowns was Israel crowned – with the crown of the Torah, the crown of the priesthood and the crown of sovereignty. The crown of the priesthood was bestowed on Aaron . . . The crown of sovereignty was conferred on David . . . But the crown of the Torah is for all Israel, as is it said, ‘Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob’ (Deut. 33:4). Whoever desires it can win it. Do not suppose that the other two crowns are greater than the crown of the Torah for it is said, ‘By me, kings reign and princes decree justice. By me, princes rule’ (Prov. 8:15-16). Hence you can infer that the crown of the Torah is greater than the other two crowns.

Maimonides, *Laws of Torah Study*, 3: 1

☞ *Non-Jewish testimony*

A twelfth century Christian monk wrote the following in one of his commentaries, in an age in which most of Europe was illiterate:

The Jews, out of their zeal for God and their love of the Law, put as many sons as they have to letters, that each may understand God’s Law . . . A Jew, however poor, if he had ten sons, would put them all to letters, not for gain, as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God’s Law; and not only his sons but his daughters.

B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 78

☞ *The medieval custom: a child’s first day at school*

This beautiful ceremony tells us how Jews in the Middle Ages celebrated a young child’s first day at school. The rabbi and community leaders would join the celebration, and they would say that bringing a child to school is ‘as though they had brought him to Mount Sinai’.

They write the letters of the Hebrew alphabet on a board for him; and they wash him and dress him in clean garments, and they knead him three loaves of fine wheat in honey . . . And they boil him three eggs and bring him apples and other kinds of fruit, and seek a worthy sage to conduct him to the school house. He covers him with his prayer-shawl and brings him to the synagogue, where they feed him with loaves of honey and eggs and fruit; and they read him the letters. After that they cover the board with honey and tell him to lick it. Then they lead him back to his mother.

🌀 *Jewish Education in the Shtetl*

From infancy the boy is guided and prodded towards scholarship. In the cradle he will listen to his mother's lullabies: 'Sleep soundly at night and learn Torah by day / And thou'lt be a Rabbi when I have grown grey.'

The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boy's school. 'Parents will bend the sky to educate their son.' The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay for her sons' schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew – for her, the two are synonymous.

Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is with People*, 85-87.

🌀 *Communities built around schools*

The history of the Jews has been a history of communities built around schools. They are the key institutions because they convey learning. Greek civilization survived for five hundred years after the Roman conquest of the Greek city-states, because the Greeks, like the Jews, had developed academies and they could live around those academies. When the academies failed, Greek civilization disappeared. The Jewish people has never allowed its academies to fail.

Daniel J. Elazar, *People and Polity*, 489.

🌀 *Learning makes sweet*

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach said: 'For one who learns Torah, even if he only has an onion to eat, it becomes a sweet onion.'

Hanoch Teller, *And from Jerusalem His Word*, 72.

🌀 *The secret of Jewish continuity*

The Israelites, slaves in Egypt for more than two hundred years, were about to go free. On the brink of their release Moses, the leader of the Jews, gathered them together and prepared to address them. He spoke not about freedom, or the promised land, or the journey across the wilderness that lay ahead. Instead he spoke about children and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. About to gain their

freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators.

Freedom, Moses intimated, is won not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, but in the human imagination and will. To defend a land you need an army. But to defend freedom you need education. You need families and schools to ensure that your ideals are passed on to the next generation, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. So Judaism became a religion of education. Its citadels are houses of study, its heroes teachers, and its passion, study and the life of the mind. Jews achieved immortality not by building monuments or mausoleums – but by engraving their values on the hearts of their children, and they on theirs, and so on until the end of time.

The Israelites built living monuments – monuments to life – and became a people dedicated to bringing new generations into being, and handing on to them the heritage of the past. Their great institutions were the family and education via the conversation between the generations. In place of temples they built houses of prayer and study. In place of stones they had words and teachings. In that counter-intuitive reversal they discovered the secret of eternity.

Jonathan Sacks, *Radical then, Radical now*, ch. 3.

Prayer

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the universe, help me to learn more in the coming year. Open my heart to your Torah, my mind to its teachings, my spirit to its inspiration. Help me to learn from others, to teach others, and to live what I learn and teach.

4

The Way of *Mitzvot*: Responding to God

Judaism's genius was to take high ideals and translate them into life by simple daily deeds: the way of *mitzvot*, acting in accordance with God's will. We do not just contemplate truth: we live it.

We don't contemplate creation by studying theoretical physics. We live it by making a blessing over what we eat and drink, acknowledging God as the creator of all we enjoy. We don't think about our responsibility for the environment. We keep Shabbat, setting a limit, one day in seven, to our exploitation of the world. We don't just study Jewish history. On the fasts and festivals, we re-enact it. Truth becomes real when it becomes deed. That is how we transform the world.

There are those who see the world as it is and accept it. That is the stoic way. There are those who see the world as it is and flee from it. That is the mystic, monastic way. But there are those who see the world as it is and change it. That is the Jewish way. We change it through *mitzvot*, holy deeds that bring a fragment of heaven down to earth.

Every *mitzvah* is a miniature act of redemption. It turns something secular into something holy. When we keep kashrut we turn food for the body into sustenance for the soul. When we keep Shabbat we sanctify time, making space in our life to breathe and give thanks, celebrating what we have instead of striving for what we do not yet have. When we observe the festivals we sanctify history by turning it into personal memory, forging a connection between our ancestors' past and our present. When we keep the laws of *tehorat hamishpachah*, family purity, we turn a physical relationship into a sacred bond of love.

The *mitzvot* bring God into our lives through the intricate choreography of a life lived in accordance with God's will. They are the poetry of the everyday, turning life into a sacred work of art.

Mitzvot teach us that faith is active, not passive. It is a matter of what we do, not just what happens to us. Performing a *mitzvah*, we come close to God, becoming His 'partner in the work of creation.' Every *mitzvah* is a window in the wall separating us from God. Each *mitzvah* lets God's light flow into the world.

☞ *Loving the law*

I rejoice in following Your statutes
as one rejoices in great riches.
I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide Your commands from me.
My soul is consumed with longing
for Your laws at all times.
Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors.
Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees;
then I will keep them to the end.
Give me understanding, and I will keep Your law
and obey it with all my heart.
I will walk about in freedom,
for I have sought out Your precepts.
I will speak of Your statutes before kings
and will not be put to shame. (Psalm 119: 14, 19-20, 24, 33-34, 45-46)

☞ *Our life and the length of our days*

With everlasting love have You loved Your people, the House of Israel.
You have taught us Torah and commands, decrees and laws of justice.
Therefore, Lord our God, when we lie down and when we rise up we will
speak of Your decrees, rejoicing in the words of Your Torah and Your
commands for ever. For they are our life and the length of our days; on
them will we meditate day and night.

Authorized Daily Prayer Book, 204-5

☞ *Every mitzvah is a step on the path to perfection*

If we could only fathom the inner meaning of the commands, we would
realize that the essence of the Torah lies in the deeper meaning of its
positive and negative precepts, each one of which aids us in our striving
after perfection, removing the impediments to the attainment of
excellence.

Maimonides, *The Epistle to Yemen*

☞ *Israel's faithfulness to the commands*

The Chasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev always sought to
see the merits of his fellow Jews, not their faults. He became his people's

advocate before God, their counsel for the defence. This he did one year in a remarkable way.

At that time, the political relationship between Russia and Turkey was hostile. All Turkish merchandise was considered contraband in Russia. The penalty for possession of Turkish goods ranged from long imprisonment to death.

One Passover night before the Seder, the Berdichever told his congregation that he could not begin the Seder without some Turkish snuff, and ordered them to find some Turkish snuff for him.

‘But, Rebbe,’ the followers responded, ‘you know that Turkish tobacco is forbidden. No one would risk the punishment of possessing Turkish snuff.’

‘No matter,’ the Rebbe answered, ‘I must have Turkish snuff.’

The people dispersed, and before long brought the Rebbe some Turkish snuff which someone had concealed.

‘Good,’ said the Rebbe, ‘now I must have some fine Turkish wool. I want a bolt of woollen cloth from Turkey.’

‘An impossible request,’ the people said. ‘No one is foolish enough to own Turkish material today.’

‘Then there shall be no Seder,’ the Berdichever said. ‘We do not begin the Seder unless you bring the Turkish wool.’

Again the crowd dispersed, and eventually brought the contraband wool to the Rebbe.

‘Good,’ the Rebbe said. ‘Now bring me a piece of bread from a Jewish home.’

‘But, Rebbe,’ the followers answered. ‘Tonight is Passover. There is no bread in any Jewish home.’

‘Never mind,’ said the Rebbe. ‘You search until you found other contraband. Go search for the bread.’

After an extensive search, the people returned empty-handed. Nowhere in Berdichev was there to be found a Jewish household that had a morsel of bread.

The Berdichever lifted his eyes toward Heaven. ‘Look, *Ribbono shel Olam*, Sovereign of the universe! The Czar has a mighty army and well-armed police who are permitted to shoot on sight anyone who defies his laws. He has ordered that under penalty of death, no one dare possess any Turkish goods. Yet when I wanted Turkish snuff, it was to be had. I wanted Turkish wool, and it too was to be found. But You, dear God, You

do not have an army. No one fears that he will be shot on sight or imprisoned. Yet You have said that no one is to have *chometz* in their possession tonight, and not a single crumb can be found in a Jewish home. Their love and devotion for You far exceeds the fear of mortal punishment. Tell me, *Ribbono shel Olam*, with such devotion from Your children, do they not deserve better treatment than You have been according them?

Adapted from Abraham J. Twerski, *Generation to Generation*, 160-61.

☞ ***The commandments: Not truth thought but truth lived***

Mitzvot mark a fundamental difference between Judaism, the life of faith, and the civilization of ancient Greece and its supreme expression, philosophy. Philosophy represents truth thought; Judaism represents truth lived. The Greeks sought knowledge of what is. Jews sought knowledge of what ought to be. So, though Judaism is a set of beliefs, it is not a creed. Instead it is a series of truths that only become true in virtue of the fact that we have lived them. By living them we turn the 'ought' into the 'is.' We make a fragment of perfection in an imperfect world and create a living truth, a life of faith. By keeping *mitzvot*, following the commandments, we help transform the world that is into the world that ought to be.

The great principles of Jewish faith are creation, revelation and redemption. But these are not truths we discover; they are truths we make real by living them. On Shabbat we live creation. Learning Torah we live revelation. Performing acts of *chesed* and *zedakah*, we live redemption. We do not philosophize about these things, we enact them. Judaism is not faith thought but faith lived.

No unified field theory will ever finally settle the question of whether or not the universe was created by a personal God. No historical investigation will ever resolve the question of whether, at Sinai, the voice the Israelites heard was real or imagined. No political theory will ever determine whether or not a just and compassionate society is possible. That is not because these things are irrational. It is because they represent truths that can only be made real in life.

I can believe that love exists, or I can believe that it is an illusion. Both views are coherent. I must choose, and that choice will shape my life, leading me to marry or to stay aloof, perhaps having 'relationships' but not a total commitment to another person. Believing in love, I find it.

Disbelieving it, I never experience it. Faith is neither rational nor irrational. It is the courage to turn 'ought' into 'is.' It is the willingness to listen to the commanding, summoning voice and turn it into deed. Mitzvot are ideals made real in the doing. The great truths of the human situation must be lived.

Jonathan Sacks, *Radical then, Radical now*, ch. 12.

Prayer

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the universe, help me to keep more *mitzvot* in the coming year. Teach me to act as You would wish me to act, that I may become an agent of Your will in the world.

5

The Way of *Tzedakah*: Love as Justice

There are two kinds of *mitzvot*. There are the commands of self-restraint that hold us back from damaging the human or natural environment. And there are the positive commands of love, for the world as God's work, and for human beings as God's image. Of the second, the greatest is *tzedakah*: love as justice (sometimes translated as 'charity').

The world is not always just, or equitable, or fair. Our task is to make it more so, by helping those in need, sharing some of what we have with others. This act of sharing is more than charity. It is a recognition of the fact that what we have, we have from God, and one of the conditions of God's gifts is that we ourselves give. That way we too become like God, 'walking in His ways'.

The market creates wealth: that is its virtue. But it does not necessarily distribute it in such a way as to alleviate poverty, granting everyone the means of a dignified life. That is its weakness. There are two possibilities: either abandon the market, or mitigate its negative effects. The first has been tried, and failed. The second can be done in two ways: through the government (taxation, welfare) or through individuals. Governments can do much, but not everything. *Tzedakah* is Judaism's way of saying that each of us has a part to play. Every one of us must give.

Tzedakah means both justice and charity, for we believe that they go hand in hand. Justice is impersonal, charity is personal. We call God *Avinu Malkenu*, 'Our Father, our King'. A king dispenses justice, a parent gives a child a gift out of love. That is the meaning of *tzedakah*, an act that combines both justice and love. Giving to others is one of the most beautiful things we can do, and one of the most creative. We create possibilities for other people. We soften some of the rough edges of the world. We help alleviate poverty and pain. We give God the sacrifice He most desires of us: that we honour His image in other people.

Nothing more marks Judaism as a religion of love than its emphasis on *tzedakah*. We do not accept poverty, hunger, homelessness or disease as God's will. To the contrary, God's will is that we heal these fractures in His world. As God feeds the hungry, so must we. As God

heals the sick, so must we. We become good by doing good. We walk in God's ways by acting out of love.

☞ *Do not be hard-hearted*

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs . . . Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in the land. (Deut. 15: 7-11)

☞ *Treasures of souls*

Our masters taught: it is related of King Monabaz [king of Adiabene in the first century CE who converted to Judaism] that during years of scarcity he spent all his own treasures and the treasures of his fathers on charity. His brothers and other members of his family reproached him: 'Your fathers stored away treasures, adding to the treasures of their fathers, and you squander them!' He replied: 'My fathers stored away for the world below, while I am storing away for the world above. My fathers stored away in a place where the hand of others can prevail, while I have stored away in a place where the hand of others cannot prevail. My fathers stored away something that produces no fruit, while I have stored away something that does produce fruit. My fathers stored away treasures of money, while I have stored away treasures of souls.'

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 11a.

☞ *Admitted to the Divine Presence*

R. Dostai son of R. Yannai taught: Consider the difference between the Holy One and a king of flesh and blood. If a man brings a present to the king, it may or may not be accepted. Even if it is accepted, it remains doubtful whether the man will be admitted into the king's presence. Not so with the Holy One. A person who gives even one small coin to a beggar is deemed worthy of being admitted to behold the Divine presence, as it is written, 'I, through charity, shall behold your face' (Ps. 17: 15). R.

Eleazar used to give a coin to a poor man and only then say his prayers, because, he said, it is written, 'I, through charity, shall behold your face.'

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 10a.

☞ *The strongest thing*

There are ten strong things in the world:

Rock is strong, but iron breaks it.

Iron is strong, but fire melts it.

Fire is strong, but water extinguishes it.

Water is strong, but the clouds carry it.

The clouds are strong, but the wind drives them.

The wind is strong, but man withstands it.

Man is strong, but fear weakens him.

Fear is strong, but wine removes it.

Wine is strong, but sleep overcomes it.

Sleep is strong, but death stands over it.

What is stronger than death?

Acts of charity (*tzedakah*), for it is written, '*Tzedakah* delivers from death' (Proverbs 10:2).

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 10a.

☞ *The ladder of charity*

There are eight degrees of charity, one higher than the other.

The highest degree, exceeded by none, is that of one who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment – in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid. With reference to such aid it is said, 'You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you' (Lev. 25: 35), which means: strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented.

A step below this is one who gives alms to the needy in such a way that the giver does not know to whom he gives and the recipient does not know from whom he takes. This exemplifies doing a good deed for its own sake. One example was the Hall of Secrecy in the Temple, where the righteous would place their gift clandestinely and where poor people from noble families could come and secretly help themselves to aid. Close to this is putting money in a charity box . . .

One step lower is where the giver knows to whom he gives, but the poor person does not know from whom he receives. Thus the great sages would go and secretly put money into poor people's doorways . . .

A step lower is when the poor person knows from whom he is taking, but the giver does not know to whom he is giving. Thus the great sages would tie coins in their scarves, which they would fling over their shoulders, so that the poor could help themselves without suffering shame.

Lower than this, is where someone gives the poor person a gift before he asks.

Lower still is one who gives only after the poor person asks.

Lower than this is one who gives less than is fitting, but does so with a friendly countenance.

The lowest level is one who gives ungraciously.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Mattenot Ani'im 10: 7-14.

☞ *Abrabanel: We own what we are willing to share*

The fifteenth century Jewish diplomat and scholar Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437-1508), chancellor to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Castile, was once asked by the king how much he owned. He named a certain sum. 'But surely', the king said, 'you own much more than that.' 'You asked me', Abrabanel replied, 'how much I owned. The property I have, I do not own. Your majesty may seize it from me tomorrow. At best I am its temporary guardian. The sum I mentioned is what I have given away in charity. That merit alone, neither you nor any earthly power can take away from me.' We own what we are willing to share.

Adapted from Abraham J. Twerski, *Do unto others*, 26-27.

☞ *Israel's two seas*

There is something strange about the geography of the Holy Land. There are two seas in Israel: the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The latter is full of life: fish, birds, vegetation. The former, as its name suggests, contains no life at all. Yet they are both fed by the same river, the Jordan. The difference is that the Sea of Galilee receives water at one end and gives out water at the other. The Dead Sea receives but does not give. The Jordan ends there. To receive without reciprocating is a kind of death. To live is to give.

☞ *Only human beings can help the poor.*

The Kaminker Rebbe once resolved to devote a whole day to reciting Psalms. Towards evening, he was still reciting when a messenger came to tell him that his mentor, the Maggid of Tzidnov, wanted to see him. The rebbe said he would come as soon as he was finished, but the messenger returned, saying that the Maggid insisted that he come immediately. When he arrived, the Maggid asked him why he had delayed. The rebbe explained that he had been reciting Psalms. The Maggid told him that he had summoned the rebbe to collect money for a poor person in need. He continued: 'Psalms can be sung by angels, but only human beings can help the poor. Charity is greater than reciting Psalms, because angels cannot perform charity.'

Adapted from Reuven Bulka, *Work, Life, Suffering and Death*, 185.

🕉️ *Prayer*

Ribbono shel Olam, Sovereign of the universe, teach me to share what I have with others, for I have much and they have little. What I have, I have from You. As You have given me what I need, so may I become Your partner by giving others what they need.

6

The Way of *Chessed*: Love as Compassion

Tzedakah is the gift of money or its equivalent. But sometimes that is not what we most need. We can suffer emotional as well as physical poverty. We can be depressed, lonely, close to despair. We may need company or comfort, encouragement or support. These too are human needs, no less real for being untranslatable into the language of politics or economics.

That is what *chessed* is about: emotional support, 'loving-kindness', love as compassion. It is what we mean when we speak of God as one who 'heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds' (Ps. 147). It includes hospitality to the lonely, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, raising the spirits of the depressed, helping people through crises in their lives, and making those at the margins feel part of the community.

It is *tzedakah's* other side. *Tzedakah* is done with material goods, *chessed* with psychological ones: time and care. *Tzedakah* is practical support, *chessed* is emotional support. *Tzedakah* is a gift of resources, *chessed* a gift of the person. Even those who lack the means to give *tzedakah* can still give *chessed*. *Tzedakah* rights wrongs; *chessed* humanizes fate.

Abraham and Sarah were chosen because of their *chessed* to others. Ruth became the ancestress of Israel's kings because of her *chessed* to Naomi. At the heart of the Judaic vision is the dream of a society based on *chessed*: society with a human face, not one dominated by the competition for wealth or power. *Chessed* is the mark of a people joined by covenant. Covenant creates society-as-extended-family; it means seeing strangers as if they were our long-lost brothers or sisters. A community based on *chessed* is a place of grace, where everyone feels honoured, everyone is at home.

☞ *Loving-kindness, not sacrifice*

For I desire loving-kindness, not sacrifice,

Acknowledgement of God, rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

☞ *Walking in God's ways*

R. Hama son of R. Haninah said, What does [the Torah] mean when it says, *You shall walk after the Lord your God* (Deut. 13: 5)? Is it possible for a human being to walk after the Divine presence? Does it not say, *For the Lord your God is a consuming fire* (Deut. 4: 24). Rather, the meaning is: you shall walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He.

Just as He clothes the naked, so shall you clothe the naked. Just as He visits the sick, so you must visit the sick. Just as the Holy One blessed be He comforts mourners, so you must comfort mourners. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, buries the dead, so you must bury the dead.

Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a.

☞ *Chessed atones*

Once, as R. Yohanan was walking out of Jerusalem, R. Joshua followed him. Seeing the Temple in ruins, he cried, 'Woe to us that this place is in ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel's iniquities.' R. Yohanan said to him: 'My son, do not grieve, for we have another means of atonement which is no less effective. What is it? It is deeds of loving-kindness, about which Scripture says, "I desire loving-kindness and not sacrifice" (Hos. 6:6).'

Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 4.

☞ *Love is never lost*

That which a person gives to another is never lost. It is an extension of his own being. He can see a part of himself in the fellow-man to whom he has given. This is the attachment between one person and his fellow to which we give the name 'love'.

R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, I, 129.

☞ *A poor man's funeral*

Once two Jews died in Brisk on the same day. In the morning a poor shoemaker who had lived out his life in obscurity died, while about noontime a wealthy prominent member of the community passed away. According to the Halakhah, in such a case the one who dies first must be buried first. However the members of the burial society, who had received a handsome sum from the heirs of the rich man, decided to attend to him first, despite the fact that he had died later, for who was there to plead the cause of the poor man? When R. Hayyim [of Brisk] was informed about the incident, he sent a messenger of the court to warn the members of the

burial society to desist from their disgraceful behaviour. The members of the burial society, however, refused to heed the directive of R. Hayyim and began to make the arrangements for the burial of the rich man. R. Hayyim then arose, took his walking stick, trudged over to the house of the deceased, and chased all the attendants outside. R. Hayyim prevailed – the poor man was buried before the rich man.

R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 95.

☞ *And maybe even higher*

Every Friday morning before dawn, the Rebbe of Nemirov would disappear. He could be found in none of the town's synagogues or houses of study. The doors of his house were open but he was not there. Once a Lithuanian scholar came to Nemirov. Puzzled by the Rebbe's disappearance he asked his followers, 'Where is he?' 'Where is the Rebbe?' they replied. 'Where else but in heaven? The people of the town need peace, sustenance, health. The Rebbe is a holy man and therefore he is surely in heaven, pleading our cause.'

The Lithuanian, amused by their credulity, determined to find out for himself. One Thursday night he hid himself in the Rebbe's house. The next morning before dawn he heard the Rebbe weep and sigh. Then he saw him go to the cupboard, take out a parcel of clothes and begin to put them on. They were the clothes, not of a holy man, but of a peasant. The Rebbe then reached into a drawer, pulled out an axe, and went out into the still dark night. Stealthily, the Lithuanian followed him as he walked through the town and beyond, into the forest. There he began chopping down a tree, hewing it into logs, and splitting it into firewood. These he gathered into a bundle and walked back into the town.

In one of the back streets, he stopped outside a run-down cottage and knocked on the door. An old woman, poor and ill, opened the door. 'Who are you?' she said. 'I am Vassily', the Rebbe replied. 'I have wood to sell, very cheap, next to nothing.' 'I have no money', replied the woman. 'I will give it to you on credit', he said. 'How will I be able to pay you?' she said. 'I trust you – and do you not trust God? He will find a way of seeing that I am repaid.' 'But who will light the fire? I am too ill.' 'I will light the fire', the Rebbe replied, and he did so, reciting under his breath the morning prayers. Then he returned home.

The Lithuanian scholar, seeing this, stayed on in the town and became one of the Rebbe's disciples. After that day, when he heard the people of

the town tell visitors that the Rebbe ascended to heaven, he no longer laughed, but added: 'And maybe even higher.'

Adapted from a short story by Y. L. Peretz.

☞ *Welcoming the Messiah*

At the third Sabbath meal, as the day grew dark and the mood intense, one of the chassidim turned to the Rebbe with a question he had long wanted to ask but had not had the courage to do so until now. 'Rebbe, why does the Messiah not come?' 'Why do you ask, my son?' 'Because', he replied, 'in the past perhaps we were not ready. The world was not ready. The hour was not right. But now, after the Holocaust, and the return of Jews to their land, has the time not come?' 'What do you mean?' the Rebbe asked, his face unchanging but his gaze intent.

The chassid continued: 'What I mean is – do we not read in the holy Talmud that at the end of days the Holy One blessed be He will bring against the Jewish people a king whose decrees will be as harsh as Haman's – and did that not happen? Was not Hitler just such a king and were his decrees not just as harsh? And did not our holy teacher Moses say that at the end of exile God will gather us in? Did he not say, 'Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back.' And has this too not occurred, now that Jews have returned to Israel from more than a hundred different lands? Why then does the Messiah not come?'

'I will tell you, my son', said the Rebbe. 'How *could* the Messiah come? Consider: If he were a chassid of one sect, the chassidim of the other sects would not recognise him. If he were a chassid of any kind, the mitnagdim, their opponents, would not recognise him. If he were Orthodox, the Reform Jews would not recognise him. If he were religious, the secular Jews would not recognise him. How then can he come?'

'And now', continued the Rebbe, 'I will tell you a great secret.' The Rebbe dropped his voice to a whisper. '*It is not we who are waiting for the Messiah. It is the Messiah who is waiting for us.* He has been here all the time. It is we who are not yet ready for him.'

Before the chassid could reply, the Rebbe continued: 'And now let me ask you a question. What would you do if the Messiah *did* arrive? Would you not greet him as a long-lost, long-awaited friend? Would you not invite him in as a royal guest and do the utmost to pay him honour and be

honoured beyond measure by his presence?’ ‘Of course’, replied the chassid. ‘Can the Rebbe doubt it?’

‘Well’, said the Rebbe, ‘I will tell you what you must do and teach others to do. Regard every person – familiar or a stranger, young or old, learned or unlearned, observant or unobservant – as if he or she might be the Messiah, for the Messiah will surely come in disguise. If only we would do this, we would find that, without our realising it, the Messiah had come.’

Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, 55-56

Prayer

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the Universe, help me this year to think more about others and less about myself. Help me to recognise those who need help or company or comfort. Teach me to say the kind word, do the kind deed. Teach me to walk in Your ways.

7

The Way of Faith: Love as Loyalty

Judaism is an unusual, subtle, profoundly humane faith that challenges the conventional wisdom of the ages. Faith is the courage Abraham and Sarah showed when they heard the call of God and left behind all they had known to travel to an unknown destination. Faith led more than a hundred generations of our ancestors to continue that journey, knowing all the risks yet believing there is no greater privilege than to be part of it. Faith is the voice that says, 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me.'

Faith sustained Jews in the dark days of persecution. It led them never to give up hope that one day they would return to Israel, Jerusalem and freedom. Jews kept faith alive. Faith kept the Jewish people alive.

Faith is not certainty. It is the courage to live with uncertainty. It is not knowing all the answers. It is often the strength to live with the questions. It is not a sense of invulnerability. It is the knowledge that we are utterly vulnerable, but that it is precisely in our vulnerability that we reach out to God, and through this learn to reach out to others, able to understand their fears and doubts. We learn to share, and in sharing discover the road to freedom. It is only because we are not gods that we are able to discover God.

God is the personal dimension of existence, the 'Thou' beneath the 'It', the 'ought' beyond the 'is', the Self that speaks to self in moments of total disclosure. Opening ourselves to the universe we find God reaching out to us. At that moment we make the life-changing discovery that though we seem utterly insignificant, we are utterly significant, a fragment of God's presence in the world. Eternity preceded us, infinity will come after us, yet we know that this day, this moment, this place, this circumstance, is full of the light of infinite radiance, whose proof is the mere fact that we are here to experience it.

Faith is where God and human beings touch across the abyss of infinity. *Eemunah* means faithfulness, love-as-loyalty. The closest analogue is marriage: a mutual commitment, entered into in love, binding the partners together in fidelity and trust. God chose us; we chose God; and

though our relationship has sometimes been tense and troubled, the bond between us is unbreakable.

Knowing, we are known. Feeling, we are felt. Acting, we are acted upon. Living, we are lived. And if we make ourselves transparent to existence, then our lives too radiate that Divine presence which, celebrating life, gives life to those whose lives we touch.

Faith is the space we create for God.

☞ *Whom then shall I fear?*

The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men close in on me to devour my flesh it is they, my enemies and foes, who stumble and fall. Should an army besiege me, my heart would not fear. Should war break out against me, still I would be confident. (Psalm 27: 1-3)

☞ *A Jew I shall remain*

Solomon ibn Verga, (Spain-Italy, 15th-16th Century) was one of the rare Jewish historians of the Middle Ages. In his account of the Spanish Expulsion, he told this story:

I heard from some of the elders who came out of Spain that one of the boats was infested with the plague, and the captain of the boat put the passengers ashore at some uninhabited place. There, most of them died of starvation, while some of them gathered all their strength to set out on foot in search of some settlement.

There was one Jew among them who struggled on afoot together with his wife and two children. The wife grew faint and died, because she was not accustomed to so much difficult walking. The husband carried his children along until both he and they fainted from hunger. When he regained consciousness, he found that his two children had died.

In great grief he rose to his feet and said: ‘O Lord of all the universe, You are doing a great deal that I might even desert my faith. But know You of a certainty that – even against the will of heaven – a Jew I am and a Jew I shall remain. And neither that which You have brought upon me nor that which You may yet bring upon me will be of any avail.’

Thereupon he gathered some earth and some grass, and covered the boys, and went forth in search of a settlement.

Shevet Yehudah, 89-94, cited in Nahum Glatzer (ed.), *A Jewish Reader*, 204.

☞ *Where we let Him in*

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) was one of the most remarkable figures of the Jewish mystical movement known as Hassidism. Angular, unconventional, passionate in his search for truth, he spent his life 'wrestling with God and with men'.

On one occasion, at the third Sabbath meal, when the atmosphere of the holy day is at its most intense, the rebbe turned to his disciples and asked, 'Where does God live?'

They were stunned by the strangeness of the question. 'What does the Rebbe mean, Where does God live? Where does God *not* live? Surely we are taught that there is no place devoid of His presence. He fills the heavens and the earth.'

'No,' said the Rebbe. 'You have not understood. God lives *where we let Him in*.'

God is always here, but we sense Him only when we search. He teaches, but only when we are ready to learn. He speaks, but only when we listen. The question is never, Where is God? It is always, Where are we? The problem of faith is not God but humankind. The task of faith is to create an openness in the soul through which the Divine presence can enter. God lives where we let Him in.

☞ *To light a fire*

The Kotzker said: Some people wear their faith like an overcoat. It only warms them, but does not benefit others at all. But some light a fire, and also warm others.

☞ *Rabbi Joseph Schneerson: Two worlds, one God*

Rabbi Joseph Schneerson ran a seminary in Russia. When the Communists came to power they ordered all religious seminaries to close. Rabbi Schneerson defied the order and continued teaching religion.

One day a government officer confronted him and ordered him to close his school. The Rebbe refused. The officer pulled out a gun and said, 'You will close the school or you will be killed.' Rabbi Schneerson showed no emotion and quietly responded, 'The school will remain open.'

The officer could not help being impressed by the Rabbi's calm demeanor and complete lack of fear. 'Don't you take me seriously?' he asked. 'Aren't you afraid of dying?'

The Rabbi responded calmly, 'Someone who has only one world and many gods is afraid of dying. Someone who has two worlds and only one God has no fear.'

Rabbi Schnerson's yeshiva remained open. In 1940 he transplanted it to the United States. Today it has branches throughout the world. Russian communism is no more.

Adapted from Abraham J. Twerski, *Do unto others*, 159-59.

🌀 **Baron Rothschild: Faith in Freedom**

It is told of Baron Nathaniel Rothschild that, after winning his battle of many years to have the disabilities of members of the Jewish faith removed from the House of Lords, he slipped away from the hierarchy of Britain congratulating him on the achievement and was to be found prostrate in prayer in a small synagogue in the Whitechapel ghetto of East London, his lips murmuring, 'Would that this freedom shall not mean the diminution of our faith.'

From Yaacov Herzog, *A People that Dwells Alone*.

🌀 **A faith of questions**

Isidore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, 'My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to ask a different question. 'Izzy,' she always used to say, 'Did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist.'

Judaism is a religion of questions. The greatest prophets asked questions of God. The Book of Job, the most searching of all explorations of human suffering, is a book of questions asked by man, to which God replies with a string of questions of His own. The seder service on Pesach begins with four questions asked by a child.

When I first went to study at a yeshivah I was struck by the way the teacher's face would light up when we asked a question. *Du fregst a gutte kashe*, 'You raise a good objection', was his highest form of praise. Abraham Twerski, an American psychiatrist, tells of how, when he was young, his instructor would relish challenges to his arguments. In his

broken English he would say, 'You right! You a hundred prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong.'

Religious faith, in Judaism, is not naïve or blind. Every question asked in reverence is the start of a journey towards God. When faith suppresses questions, it dies. When it accepts superficial answers, it begins to wither. Faith is not opposed to doubt. What it *is* opposed to is the shallow certainty that what we understand is all there is.

Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, 79-81

🕯 *Faith after the Holocaust*

Rabbi Yekutiel Halberstam, the Klausenberger Rebbe, lived through the Warsaw Ghetto, the work camps, the death march to Dachau, and then Auschwitz itself. He survived, but his wife and eleven children did not. In Auschwitz, he vowed that if he survived he would dedicate himself to life. He resolved to build a hospital that would honour the image of God in every human being. It took him fifteen years to raise the money, but eventually he built the Laniado hospital in Netanya, Israel, dedicated to treating everyone alike, Jew and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian. This is what he taught his followers after the Holocaust:

The biggest miracle of all is the one that we, the survivors of the Holocaust, after all that we witnessed and lived through, still believe and have faith in the Almighty God, may His name be blessed. This, my friends, is the miracle of miracles, the greatest miracle ever to have taken place.

Yaffa Eliach, *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust*, 228.

🕯 *Prayer*

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the universe, teach me to have faith in You as You have faith in me. Open my ears to Your voice, my eyes to Your wonders, my heart to Your love.

8

The Way of Israel: The Jewish Land

No religion in history has been as closely tied to a land as has Judaism. That connection goes back 4,000 years, from the first words of God to Abraham: 'Leave your country, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land I will show you.' No sooner had he arrived than God said: 'To your offspring I will give this land.' Seven times God promised the land to Abraham, and promised it again to Isaac and Jacob.

The word *teshuvah*, often translated as 'repentance', literally means 'homecoming' in a double sense: spiritually to God, and physically to the land of Israel. For Israel is the Jewish people's place of destiny: a tiny land for a tiny people, yet one whose role in religious history is vast. It is the land to which Moses and the Israelites travelled across the desert, the land from which they were exiled twice, the land to which our ancestors journeyed whenever they could and which they never voluntarily left, never relinquished. Jewish history is the story of the longing for a land.

The holy land remains the place where Jews were summoned to create a society of justice and compassion under the sovereignty of God. And though it was subsequently held holy by Christianity and Islam, it was so only in a derivative sense – because it was the land promised to Abraham, from whom first Christians, then Muslims, claimed to be descended. The centres of these other faiths were elsewhere: for Western Christians, Rome, for Eastern Christians, Constantinople, for Muslims, Mecca and Medinah. There are 56 Islamic states today, 82 Christian ones, but only one Jewish state. It is the only place on earth where Jews are a majority, where they enjoy self-rule, where they are able to build a society and shape a culture as Jews.

The Balfour Declaration in 1917, subsequently ratified by the League of Nations, long before the Holocaust, was an attempt to rectify the single most sustained crime against humanity: the denial of a nation's right to its land and the subsequent persecution of Jews in country after country, century after century, in a history of suffering that has no parallel.

The Jews who returned were not strangers, outsiders, an imperial presence, a colonial force. They were the land's original inhabitants: the only people in 4,000 years who created an independent nation there. All

other occupiers of the land – from the Assyrians and Babylonians to the Ottomans and British – were imperial powers, who ruled the land as a district of their vast realms. The Egyptians did not offer the Palestinians a state when they ruled Gaza between 1948 and 1967; neither did the Jordanians when they ruled the West Bank during those years. The only nation to have offered Palestinians a state is the State of Israel. We pray for its peace.

☞ ***Moses' prophecy of return***

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. (Deut 30: 4)

☞ ***The exiles' lament: By the waters of Babylon***

By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion . . .
How can we sing the Lord's songs
in a strange land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
as my highest joy. (Psalm 137)

☞ ***Amos' vision***

'I will bring back my exiled people Israel;
they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them.
They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;
they will make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant Israel in their own land,
never again to be uprooted
from the land I have given them,'
says the Lord your God. (Amos 9: 11-15)

☞ ***Napoleon's call***

In 1798 Napoleon began his campaign in the Middle East, landing first in Egypt, then in Palestine. With a strong sense of history, he realised that

this could herald the return of Jews to the land from which they had been exiled for so long. He sent this message to the Jews:

Thousands of years of conquest and tyranny have deprived you of your ancestral lands. Yet for all the time you have somehow continued to exist as a nation. Long ago when the prophets Joel and Isaiah saw the approaching destruction of their fatherland they also foretold the day it would be restored. Now at last that day has dawned. Arise with gladness, ye heirs of Palestine. A great nation [France] calls on you to take on what has been conquered and to remain as masters there, defending it against all comers. Hasten! Now is the moment which may not return for generations to claim back the rights you have been deprived of for thousands of years, to live again as a nation among nations.

Premier Floreal (20 April) 1799; quoted by F. Kobler, 'Napoleon and the restoration of the Jews to Palestine' in *The New Judaea*, September 1940, p. 190.

☞ **Chateaubriand**

Soon after Napoleon's campaign, the French historian Chateaubriand visited Jerusalem. There he found a tiny Jewish community whose persistence filled him with awe. Speaking of the Jewish settlement, he wrote:

It has seen Jerusalem destroyed seventeen times, yet there exists nothing in the world which can discourage it or prevent it from raising its eyes to Zion. He who beholds the Jews dispersed over the face of the earth, in keeping with the Word of God, lingers and marvels. But he will be struck with amazement, as at a miracle, who finds them still in Jerusalem and perceives even, who in law and justice are the masters of Judea, to exist as slaves and strangers in their own land; how despite all abuses they await the king who is to deliver them . . . If there is anything among the nations of the world marked with the stamp of the miraculous, this, in our opinion, is that miracle.

R. Mahler, *A History of Modern Jewry 1780-1815*, 621.

☞ **Emir Faisal**

Not all Arab leaders were opposed to Zionism. Some recognised the historic connection between Jews and the land of Israel. They knew that a Jewish presence could bring prosperity to the whole area. This letter was

written by King Faisal to the American-Jewish judge Felix Frankfurter on 3 March 1919:

We feel that the Arabs and Jews are cousins in race, having suffered similar oppressions at the hands of powers stronger than themselves, and by a happy coincidence have been able to take the first step towards the attainment of their national ideals together.

We Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement . . . We will do our best, in so far as we are concerned, to help them through: we will wish the Jews a most hearty welcome home . . .

We are working together for a reformed and revived Near East, and our two movements complete one another. The Jewish movement is national and not imperialist. Our movement is national and not imperialist, and there is room in Syria [the name given at that time to the whole area that is now Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel] for us both. Indeed I think that neither can be a real success without the other . . .

I look forward, and my people with me look forward, to a future in which we will help you and you will help us, so that the countries in which we are mutually interested may once again take their places in the community of civilised peoples of the world.

In Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin (eds.), *The Israel Arab Reader*, 19-20.

☞ *Winston Churchill: for the good of all the world*

I believe that the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine will be a blessing to the whole world, a blessing to the Jewish race scattered all over the world, and a blessing to Great Britain . . . The hope of your race for so many centuries will be gradually realized here, not only for your own good, but for the good of all the world.

Speech at Mount Scopus, 29 March 1921, in Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*, 56-57.

☞ *1948: Israel's Declaration of Independence*

From the outset, Jews sought peace with its neighbours. It accepted the various plans for partition in the 1920s and 1930s; it accepted the partition proposal of the United Nations in 1947. Its neighbours rejected all proposals. The offer of peace was renewed soon after the Six Day War. The response of the Arab League, meeting in Khartoum in September 1967, was the famous 'Three Nos': no to peace, no to negotiations, no to

the recognition of the State of Israel. The call to peace was a central strand of Israel's Declaration of Independence in May 1948:

Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom . . .

We appeal - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

We extend our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East . . . Placing our trust in the 'Rock of Israel', we affix our signatures to this proclamation at this session of the provisional Council of State, on the soil of the homeland, in the city of Tel-Aviv, on this Sabbath eve, the 5th day of Iyar, 5708 (14 May, 1948).

☞ ***Yitzhak Rabin: Enough of blood and tears***

In September 1993, the then Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, shook hands with Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, marking the start of what was hoped to be a peace process. It was not to be. Within a year Israel suffered its first suicide bombing. In 1995 Rabin himself was assassinated. The speech he made that day is one of the greatest speeches of the twentieth century.

We have come from Jerusalem, the ancient and eternal capital of the Jewish people. We have come from an anguished and grieving land. We have come from a people, a home, a family, that has not known a single year – not a single month – in which mothers have not wept for their sons. We have come to try and put an end to the hostilities, so that our children

and our children's children will no longer have to experience the painful cost of war, violence and terror. We have come to secure their lives, and to ease the sorrow and the painful memories of the past – to hope and pray for peace.

Let me say to you, the Palestinians: We are destined to live together, on the same soil in the same land. We, the soldiers who have returned from battle stained with blood, we who have seen our relatives and friends killed before our eyes, we who have attended their funerals and cannot look into the eyes of their parents, we who have come from a land where parents bury their children, we who have fought against you, the Palestinians – we say to you today in a loud and clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough.

We have no desire for revenge. We harbor no hatred towards you. We, like you, are people who want to build a home, to plant a tree, to love, to live side by side with you – in dignity, in empathy, as human beings, as free men. We are today giving peace a chance and again saying to you: Let us pray that a day will come when we will say, enough, farewell to arms.

We wish to turn over a new chapter in the sad book of our lives together – a chapter of mutual recognition, of good neighborliness, of mutual respect, of understanding. We hope to embark on a new era in the history of the Middle East. Today, here in Washington, at the White House, we will begin a new reckoning in relations between peoples, between parents tired of war, between children who will not know war.

President of the United States, ladies and gentlemen, Our inner strength, our higher moral values, have been derived for thousands of years from the Book of Books, in one of which, Ecclesiastes, we read: 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; A time to kill, and a time to heal; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; A time to love, and a time to hate; A time for war, and a time for peace.' Ladies and gentlemen, the time for peace has come.

Prayer

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the universe, send peace to the land and people of Israel. Let the bloodshed end. Let the hate end. Let Israel be what for four thousand years it was meant to be: the place where the

people of Your covenant could build a society to honour the dignity of man under the sovereignty of God.

9

The Way of *Kiddush Hashem*: The Jewish Task

The way of Judaism is particular; the concern of Judaism is universal. Abraham was promised that 'Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.' Isaiah said that we are called on to be God's 'witnesses'. Our message is not for ourselves alone.

How so? We do not seek to convert others. We believe that the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come. But we do seek to be living examples, reflections of God's light, an inspiration to others to find their own way to God. That, we believe, is the only way of honouring the fact, after Babel, of a world of many cultures and civilizations. God is one; we are many; and we must learn to live together in peace. That is why we do not seek to impose our faith on others. Truth is communicated by influence not power, by example not by force or fear.

Others have understood this about us, and the quotations in this chapter are testimony to this fact. Winston Churchill said that the West owes to the Jews 'a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be incomparably the most precious possession of mankind, worth in fact the fruits of all other learning and wisdom put together'.

At a time when we have witnessed the resurgence of antisemitism, the world's oldest hatred, it is important to know that, yes, we have enemies but we also have friends. We have critics, but there are those who, without seeking to become Jewish, have drawn inspiration from Jewish life. We owe it to them, not just to ourselves, to be faithful to our task: to be God's ambassadors on earth.

✿ *Rousseau: an astonishing phenomenon*

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was one of the most influential political thinkers in modern times: his *The Social Contract* helped inspire the French Revolution. After his death, the following note was discovered among his unpublished papers.*

But an astonishing and truly unique spectacle is to see an expatriated people, who have had neither place nor land for nearly two thousand years, a people mingled with foreigners, no longer perhaps having a single descendant of the early races, a scattered people, dispersed over the world, enslaved, persecuted, scorned by all nations, nonetheless preserving its characteristics, its laws, its customs, its patriotic love of the early social union, when all ties with it seem broken. The Jews provide us with an astonishing spectacle: the laws of Numa, Lycurgus, Solon are dead; the very much older laws of Moses are still alive. Athens, Sparta, Rome have perished and no longer have children left on earth; Zion, destroyed, has not lost its children.

They mingle with all the nations and never merge with them; they no longer have leaders, and are still a nation; they no longer have a homeland, and are always citizens of it . . . Any man whosoever he is, must acknowledge this as a unique marvel, the causes of which, Divine or human, certainly deserve the study and admiration of the sages, in preference to all that Greece and Rome offer of what is admirable in the way of political institutions and human settlements.

The manuscript is to be found in the public library at Neuchâtel (Cahiers de brouillons, notes et extraits, no. 7843)

☞ *President John Adams: Jews and Civilization*

John Adams (1735-1826) was America's first Vice-President (1789-1797) and second President (1797-1801).

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist, and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations. If I were an atheist of the other sect, who believe or pretend to believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization.

President John Adams to F. A. Vanderkemp, February 16, 1809, in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. C. F. Adams, vol. 9, pp. 609-10.

☞ *Leo Tolstoy: as everlasting as eternity itself*

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), author of War and Peace and Anna Karenina, was perhaps the greatest novelist of all time. In 1877 he had an intense religious experience and thereafter devoted most of his life to religion and a new vision of society which influenced some of the early Zionists as well as Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

The Jew is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire and has illuminated with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions . . . The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither fire nor sword nor inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth, he who was the first to produce the oracles of God, he who has been for so long the guardian of prophecy, and who has transmitted it to the rest of the world – such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as eternity itself.

Letter found in the archives of the Bulgarian statesman F. Gabai.
Text in Allan Gould, *What did they think of the Jews*, 180-181.

☞ **Mark Twain: all things are mortal but the Jew**

Mark Twain was the pen name of American novelist Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910). The following famous passage is taken from a magazine article he wrote in 1899 in answer to a request to clarify his views about the Jews.

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way.

Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvellous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it.

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendour, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the

Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind.

All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Mark Twain, 'Concerning the Jews', *Harper's Magazine*, June 1899.

☞ **Nicolai Berdyaev: the refutation of materialism**

Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) was a Marxist who held the chair in philosophy at the University of Moscow. In later life he rejected Marxism and became increasingly devoted to religion. In The Meaning of History he tells of how he came to realize that the history of the Jews refuted the Marxist belief that the destiny of civilizations was ruled by material forces alone.

I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint . . . Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny.

Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, 1936, 86-87.

☞ **Winston Churchill**

Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are beyond question the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world.

Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*, 308.

☞ **Paul Johnson**

Paul Johnson (1928-) is a Catholic historian, former editor of the New Statesman, and author of A History of the Jews, from which these passages are taken.

No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny. At a very early stage in their collective existence they believed they had detected a Divine scheme for the human race, of which their own society as to be a pilot. They worked out their role in immense detail. They clung to it with heroic persistence in the face of savage suffering. Many of them believe it still. Others transmuted it into Promethean endeavours to raise our condition by purely human means. The Jewish vision became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both Divine and man-made. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.

All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both Divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place.

Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, 2; 585.

✎ **William Rees Mogg**

Lord Rees-Mogg (1928-) is an author, journalist and former editor of The Times.

One of the gifts of Jewish culture to Christianity is that it has taught Christians to think like Jews, and any modern man who has not learned to think as though he were a Jew can hardly be said to have learned to think at all.

William Rees-Mogg, *The Reigning Error*, 11.

✎ **A. L. Rowse**

A. L. Rowse (1903-1997), Fellow of All Souls, was a historian, poet, Shakespeare scholar, and author of some 100 books. The following remark is the penultimate sentence of a book published shortly before he died.

If there is any honour in all the world that I should like, it would be to be an honorary Jewish citizen.

A. L. Rowse, *Historians I have Known*, 1995.

☞ **Thomas Cahill: *Shapers of the West***

*Cahill, a Catholic historian, studied Judaism for two years in preparation for his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, from which the following passages are taken.*

The Jews started it all – and by ‘it’ I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings . . .

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. Indeed, as we shall see, the very idea of *vocation*, of a personal destiny, is a Jewish idea.

The Jews gave us the Outside and the Inside – our outlook and our inner life. We can hardly get up in the morning or cross the street without being Jewish. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact – *new, adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice* – are the gifts of the Jews.

Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*, pp. 3, 240-41.

☞ **Andrew Marr: *Stories for the rest of us***

*Andrew Marr (1959-) is a journalist, political philosopher and broadcaster. The following is taken from an article he wrote for *The Observer*,*

The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us. They have had their Bible, one of the great imaginative works of the human spirit. They have been victim of the worst modernity can do, a mirror for Western madness. Above all they have had the story of their cultural and genetic survival from the Roman Empire to the 2000s, weaving and thriving amid uncomprehending, hostile European tribes.

This story, their post-Bible, their epic of bodies, not words, involved an intense competitive hardening of generations which threw up, in the end, a blaze of individual geniuses in Europe and America. Outside painting, Morris dancing and rap music, it's hard to think of many areas of Western endeavour where Jews haven't been disproportionately successful. For non-Jews, who don't believe in a people being chosen by God, the lesson is that generations of people living on their wits and hard work, outside the more comfortable mainstream certainties, will seed Einsteins and Wittgensteins, Trotskys and Seiffs. Culture matters . . .

The Jews really have been different; they have enriched the world and challenged it.

Andrew Marr, *The Observer*, Sunday May 14, 2000

Prayer

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the Universe, help me to act so as to bring honour to Your name.

10

The Way of Responsibility: The Jewish Future

For every Jew today there are 183 Christians and 100 Muslims. 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 did God choose this tiny people 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 are we so few? Why this dissonance between the greatness of the task and the smallness of the people charged with carrying it out?

There is a strange passage in the Torah: '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). The implication is unmistakable. *It is dangerous to count Jews*. Centuries later, King David ignored the warning and disaster struck the nation. Why is it dangerous to count Jews?

Nations take censuses on 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 Jews ever believed that their strength lay in numbers, we would give way, God forbid, to despair. In Israel they were always a minor power surrounded by great empires. In the Diaspora, everywhere they were a minority.

Where then did Jewish strength lie if not in numbers? The Torah gives an answer of surpassing beauty. God tells Moses: Do not count Jews. *Ask them to give, and then count the contributions*. 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: the Torah, the literature of the prophets, the poetry of the Psalms, the rabbinic wisdom of the Mishnah, Midrash and Talmud, the vast medieval library of commentaries and codes, philosophy and mysticism. Then, as the doors of Western society opened, Jews made their mark in one field after another: business,

industry, the arts and sciences, cinema, the media, medicine, law and almost every field of academic life. They revolutionised thought in physics, economics, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Jews have won Nobel Prizes out of all proportion to our numbers.

The simplest explanation 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. They knew it was a responsibility. God asked great things of the Jewish people, and in so doing, made them great.

When it comes to making a contribution, numbers do not count. What matters is commitment, passion, dedication to a cause. Precisely because we are so small as a people, every one of us counts. We each make a difference to the fate of Judaism and the Jewish people. Zechariah said 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 Jewish, and to the human story. The Jewish question is not, What can the world give me? It is, What can I give to the world? Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

Here am I

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' (Isaiah 6: 8)

Do not be a by-stander

Do not stand idly by when your brother's life is in danger. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19: 16)

Mordechai and Esther: Taking responsibility

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: 'Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will come from elsewhere, but you and your

father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?' (Esther 4: 12-14)

🌀 *Sharing a fate*

A man in a boat began to bore a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers protested. 'What concern is it of yours?' he responded, 'I am making a hole under my seat, not yours.' They replied, 'That is so, but when the water enters and the boat sinks, we too will drown.'

Leviticus Rabbah 4: 6.

🌀 *The great principle*

All Israel are sureties for one another.

Sifra, Behukotai 2: 7.

🌀 *Hillel's wisdom*

Hillel used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Ethics of the Fathers 1: 14.

🌀 *Our next act can change the world*

Throughout the year, everyone should see himself and the world as if evenly poised between innocence and guilt. If he commits a sin he tilts the balance of his fate and that of the world to guilt, causing destruction. If he performs a good deed he shifts the balance of his fate and that of the world to innocence, bringing salvation and deliverance to others. That is the meaning of [the biblical phrase] 'the righteous person is the foundation of the world' (Prov. 10: 25), namely that by an act of righteousness we influence the fate of, and save, the world.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 3: 4.

🌀 *Martin Niemöller: no one left to speak up.*

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

🌀 *The Starfish*

An old man was walking on the beach at dawn when he noticed a young man picking up starfish stranded by the retreating tide, and throwing them back into the sea one by one. He went up to him and asked him why he was doing this. The young man replied that the starfish would die if left exposed to the morning sun. 'But the beach goes on for miles, and there are thousands of starfish. You will not be able to save them all. How can your effort make a difference?' The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. 'To *this one*', he said, 'it makes a difference.'

Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower*

☞ ***The righteous do not complain***

The pure and righteous do not complain about wickedness: they increase righteousness. They do not complain about heresy: they increase faith. They do not complain about ignorance: they increase wisdom.

R. Avraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook

☞ ***To save the oppressed***

Once R. Hayyim of Brisk was asked what the function of a rabbi is. R. Hayyim 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 hand of his oppressor.'

R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 91.

☞ ***Rabbi Tarfon: It is not for you to complete the task***

Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the labourers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master insistent. He used to say: It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it.

Ethics of the Fathers 2: 20-21.

☞ ***A blessing to others***

To be a Jew is to be alert to the poverty, the suffering, the loneliness of others. Karl Marx called religion 'the opium of the people'. No religion is less so than Judaism. 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 – politicians, columnists, protestors, campaigners – making them

our agents to bring redemption on our behalf. Life is God's question; our choices are the answer.

To be a Jew is to be a blessing to others. That is what God told Abraham in the first words he spoke to him, words that four thousand years ago set Jewish history into motion. 'Through you,' he said, 'all the families on earth will be blessed.' To be a Jew is not to ask for a blessing. It is to be a blessing.

Judaism is about creating spiritual energy: the energy that, if used for the benefit of others, changes lives and begins to change the world. 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.

When we give, when we say, 'If this is wrong, let me be among the first to help put it right,' we create moments of imperishable moral beauty. We know how small we are, and how inadequate to the tasks God has set us. 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.

Jonathan Sacks, *From Renewal to Responsibility*

🕯 *Prayer*

Ribbono shel olam, Sovereign of the universe, help me act so that in the coming year I am able to say: I heard, I responded, I gave, I grew. Write us, so that we may write others, in the Book of Life.

Epilogue: Why I am a Jew

I am proud to be a Jew. Pride is not arrogance. Arrogance is the belief that you are better than others. Pride is simply knowing that each of us is different and being at ease with that fact, never 'desiring this man's gift and that man's scope'. Arrogance diminishes others, and therefore diminishes us. Pride values others, because we have learned to value ourselves.

I learned this lesson from an old Israeli boatman in Eilat. We had gone there, my wife and I, to find the sun after a cold northern winter. Eilat is set in the desert among brown and barren hills. One morning we decided to go out in one of the glass-bottomed boats, through which you can see the multicolored fish that swim in Eilat's waters. We were the only passengers on that trip.

The captain overheard us talking, and rushed over to us. *Atem me-Anglia?* 'Are you from England?' Yes, we said. Why did he want to know? Ah, he said, I have just come back from a holiday there. What did he think of England? 'Wonderful! The grass – so green! The buildings – so old! The people – so polite!' And then a vast smile filled his face, and he spread his arms and looked around him at the barren desert hills and said, with an air of infinite delight, *Aval zeh shelanu*, 'But this is ours.'

Then I knew what it is to be a Jew. There are other cultures, other civilizations, other peoples, other faiths. Each has contributed something unique to the total experience of mankind. Jews didn't write Shakespeare's sonnets or Beethoven's quartets. We did not give the world the serene beauty of a Japanese garden or the architecture of ancient Greece. I love these things and admire the traditions that brought them forth. *Aval zeh shelanu*, but this is ours. This is our faith, our people, our heritage. By loving them I learn to love humanity in its diversity. At peace with myself, I find peace with the world.

I am a Jew not because of anti-Semitism or to avoid giving Hitler a posthumous victory. What happens to me does not define who I am: ours is a people of faith, not fate. Nor is it because I think that Jews are better than others, more intelligent, virtuous, law-abiding, creative, generous or successful. The difference lies not in Jews but Judaism, not in what we are but in what we are called on to be.

I am a Jew because, being a child of my people, I have heard the call to add my chapter to its unfinished story. I am a stage on its journey, a connecting link between the generations. The dreams and hopes of my ancestors live on in me, and I am the guardian of their trust, now and for the future.

I am a Jew because our ancestors were the first to see that the world is driven by a moral purpose, that reality is not a ceaseless war of the elements, to be worshipped as gods, nor history a battle in which might is right and power is to be appeased. The Judaic tradition shaped the moral civilization of the West, teaching for the first time that human life is sacred, that the individual may never be sacrificed for the mass, and that rich and poor, great and small, are all equal before God.

I am a Jew because I am the heir of those who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and pledged themselves to live by these truths, becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. I am the descendant of countless generations of ancestors who, though sorely tested and bitterly tried, remained faithful to that covenant when they might so easily have defected.

I am a Jew because of Shabbat, the world's greatest religious institution, a time in which there is no manipulation of nature or our fellow human beings, in which we come together in freedom and equality to create, every week, an anticipation of the messianic age.

I am a Jew because our nation, though at times it suffered the deepest poverty, never gave up on its commitment to helping the poor, or rescuing Jews from other lands, or fighting for justice for the oppressed, and did so without self-congratulation, because it was a *mitzvah*, because a Jew could do no less.

I am a Jew because I cherish the Torah, knowing that God is to be found not in natural forces but in moral meanings, in words, texts, teachings and commands, and because Jews, though they lacked all else, never ceased to value education as a sacred task, endowing the individual with dignity and depth.

I am a Jew because of our people's passionate faith in freedom, holding that each of us is a moral agent, and that in this lies our unique dignity as human beings; and because Judaism never left its ideals at the level of lofty aspirations, but instead translated them into deeds which we call *mitzvot*, and a way, which we call the *halakhah*, and thus brought heaven down to earth.

I am proud, simply, to be a Jew.

I am proud to be part of a people who, though scarred and traumatized, never lost their humor or their faith, their ability to laugh at present troubles and still believe in ultimate redemption; who saw human history as a journey, and never stopped traveling and searching.

I am proud to be part of an age in which my people, ravaged by the worst crime ever to be committed against a people, responded by reviving a land, recovering their sovereignty, rescuing threatened Jews throughout the world, rebuilding Jerusalem, and proving themselves to be as courageous in the pursuit of peace as in defending themselves in war.

I am proud that our ancestors refused to be satisfied with premature consolations, and in answer to the question, 'Has the Messiah come?' always answered, 'Not yet.'

I am proud to belong to the people Israel, whose name means 'one who wrestles with God and with man and prevails.' For though we have loved humanity, we have never stopped wrestling with it, challenging the idols of every age. And though we have loved God with an everlasting love, we have never stopped wrestling with Him nor He with us.

And though I admire other civilizations and faiths, and believe each has brought something special into the world, still this is my people, my heritage, my God. In our uniqueness lies our universality. Through being what we alone are, we give to humanity what only we can give.

This is our story, our gift to the next generation. I received it from my parents and they from theirs across great expanses of space and time. There is nothing quite like it. It changed and still challenges the moral imagination of mankind. I want to say to the next generation: Take it, cherish it, learn to understand and to love it. Carry it and it will carry you. And may you in turn pass it on to your children. For you are a member of an eternal people, a letter in their scroll. Let their eternity live on in you.