



Little Books of Big Questions  
Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

### Foreward

We were sitting together round the table in our home, after the reception Elaine and I give each year for the leadership of UJS and NUS. 2006-7 had been a tough year – the academic boycott, deepening criticism of Israel and a general unease about terror and religious radicalism. It was a bad year for religion in general, with books on atheism becoming best sellers.

The Jewish student leaders seemed troubled, so we asked them to stay behind and simply talk about what was on their mind. These pamphlets are summarised accounts of what we spoke about.

The names of the students have been changed.

Philip began by raising the most fundamental question of all.

Why be Jewish at all in the twenty-first century? Haven't we given the world everything Judaism first taught: freedom, human dignity, rights? Do we really need religion in an age of science? Do we really need to stay different, special, set apart? Don't we need, on the contrary, to learn how to live together? Isn't Judaism simply outmoded in a secular age?

I don't think so. There is something in the human condition that aspires beyond the secular, the material, the visible and quantifiable. We may be 'dust of the earth' but we have immortal longings. We are the meaning-seeking animal. Only *homo sapiens* can imagine a world other than the one we currently live in. We are the only beings able to construct sentences in the future tense. We are the one life-form known to us in the universe capable of asking the question, '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 more than any other faith, Judaism has given expression to it. In the fine words of the Catholic writer, Paul Johnson, 'No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny . . . The Jews, therefore, stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.'

Life is more than the money we earn, the car we drive, the clothes we wear. Religion is the space we make in our life for the things that are important, not just urgent.

The unbroken role of Judaism for forty centuries has been to lift our sights beyond the status quo and say: there is better way. We are the iconoclasts, the people with the courage to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols, whatever the age. Judaism is the countervoice in the human conversation. When people worshipped power, Judaism stood up for the powerless. When ninety percent of Europe was illiterate, Jews cared about education. When the vast majority of humanity lived in poverty, Judaism practised the principle of *tzedakah*, the duty on those who have more than they need, to share with those who have less. So it is today. The idols change. But the Jewish duty to show there is another way has not changed.

### So what is 'the other way' today?

The other way is to say that all we have created in the twenty-first century is a means, not an end. Our economic advances mean that we can address the poverty of a world in which a billion people live without adequate food, shelter and medical resources. Our medical advances mean that we can begin to do something about the 30,000 children who die every day from preventable diseases. Our technological advances mean that we can use the Internet to bring knowledge to the 115 million children who today go without any education at all.

### But that has nothing to do with religion, let alone Judaism.

Really? The debt relief programme that led directly to Make Poverty History was called Jubilee 2000, and was based directly on the debt relief provisions of the Torah set out in *Vayikra* [Leviticus] chapter 25.

We live in a culture all of whose values were originally religious. We've simply forgotten that fact.

It was Judaism, the Hebrew Bible, that first broke with myth and taught that the world was the product of a single creative will, thus preparing the way for science. It was Judaism that first taught that every human being, black, white, rich, poor, weak, strong, is in God's image, thus laying the basis for a free society. It was Judaism that first taught that God, after the Flood, made a covenant with all humanity, thus creating the idea of global human solidarity.

These ideas emerged in the Judeo-Christian West, nowhere else. They are unique to the civilisation built on the values of the *Tanach* [bible] – the values that made their way into European culture with the birth of printing, the spread of books, and the availability of Bibles translated into languages people could understand. The 'modern' was biblical through-and-through. It's just that we've forgotten this fact.

### But in that case, we're all heirs to that heritage, whether we know it or not. You certainly don't need to be religious, or Jewish, to live in today's world, whatever debts it owes to Jews or Judaism or the Bible or the past.

Not so. There is a difference between scientific truths and human truths – truths about life. The truths of science are true, and always have been, whether they have been discovered or not. The truths about human life, individual and social, exist only if we live them. If we don't, they disappear. Societies have found freedom then lost it again. Whole civilisations have disappeared. That happened to Mesopotamia, the Egypt of the Pharaohs, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, the ancient Greeks and Romans, and so on all the way to Soviet communism. They exist today only in history books and museums. Virtually the only cultures that have ever lasted, undiminished, are Judaism and the two other religions based on it: Christianity and Islam.

If we lose Judaism, we will eventually lose Western civilisation and everything associated with it. If you doubt the capacity of civilisations to destroy themselves, just read Jared Diamond's books, *The Third Chimpanzee*, and *Collapse*.

### Are you serious? The future of Western civilisation depends on my being Jewish?

Yes, it sounds crazy, over-dramatic and self-serving.

Yet Europe is dying. There is not a single European nation that has anywhere near replacement birthrates. That is because of the collapse of marriage in the course of a single generation. Freedom of expression is dying in British universities, the result of the twin impact of political correctness and academic boycotts. The delicate ecological balance of the earth is dying because we've forgotten the lessons of Shabbat and the sabbatical year: the principle that there must be limits to our exploitation of the earth and its resources. Judaism has seen every major civilisation outside the Far East – forces that seemed invulnerable in their day – collapse and die.

It alone survives. Why the Jews?

I believe the answer has to do with Divine providence; but at a human level it may simply be because, as the Torah says, we are the obstinate, stiff-necked people who refused to do what everyone else was doing, because we had the courage to believe in the dignity of difference. We didn't go with the flow. We kept faith – with God, with our ancestors, with our covenant of destiny. Somehow, in some obscure way, a series of truths about the human situation – the truths we call Torah – got hold of us and never let us go. And humanity needs those truths. Not just in a book, but in lives – in your life and mine.

**You're asking me to believe that whether or not I live as a Jew is going to make a difference not just to me but to humanity?**

I don't ask you to do anything I haven't done myself. I did not go to university expecting to discover my Jewish identity. In fact, it was there that it was really challenged. Yet it was there that I discovered the truths that changed my life: that if I didn't stay Jewish, my entire family history – more than a hundred generations – would come to an end with me. My ancestors prayed for freedom. Should I, having found it, take what they lived for and throw it away? Jews were prepared to die for their faith. Was I unprepared even to live for it?

So I made my choice: to live as a Jew and learn about Judaism. Almost without thinking about it, I discovered the path to personal meaning: through our marriage, the family we created, the communities we helped build, the connections we made with Jews throughout the world, and the way we lit our lives by the *mitzvot* [commandments] we kept. And I wrote about the problems of today, and discovered that our heritage really does speak not only to Jews but to non-Jews also.

Judaism is our family heritage – our equivalent of a Leonardo painting, acquired by a distant ancestor, handed on from one generation to the next – and now it's ours. Could I really give it away? Throw it away? Sell it – knowing that in truth, it's priceless? That's what Judaism is and more. And right now, its future is in your hands.

#### **For further reading**

My own book on this subject is **Radical Then, Radical Now**. Alternatively, try James Kugel, **On Being a Jew**; Emil Fackenheim, **What is Judaism?**; Herman Wouk, **This is My God**; or Daniel Gordis, **Does the World Need the Jews?**