Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

PES THE PAUL E. SINGER FOUNDATION

BOOK EXCERPT

A Letter in the Scroll

Many of Rabbi Sacks' readers and listeners remember him describing his experiences before, during and after the Six Day War, encountering a generation of young Jews with a newfound sense of connection to the Jewish people and Israel.

For too long, Jews have defined themselves in light of the bad things that have happened to them. The historical struggles and ongoing conflicts are undeniable, from the founding of the State of Israel to the war it is currently enduring. But the Jewish people have survived catastrophe after catastrophe and have not only survived, but thrived, and Israel has evolved into a resilient and dynamic society.

In this chapter, from "A Letter in the Scroll," Rabbi Sacks explores that moment in Jewish history, the endurance of Jewish identity, and its impact on the world. May Rabbi Sacks' words in this chapter serve as a source of strength, and may God protect the people of Israel in these difficult times.

CHAPTER 3

Who Am I? Who Are We?

It happened in the never-to-be-forgotten summer of 1967. I had just gone to university, leaving home for the first time. Until then I had been a Jew because—well, because that is what my parents were. I did what I did without asking why. I had my bar mitzvah, I went to Hebrew classes, and every Saturday I went to synagogue with my father. There was no reason not to, no reason to rebel.

Cambridge was like a revelation. Here for the first time I could feel the lure of another history, the siren call of a different culture. Everything about it was dazzling: the river, the lawns, the college buildings dating back to medieval times, the gowns, the bicycles, the dons, the whole rich texture of a world of stunning beauty that was not my own.

And there was an intellectual shock in store. Without quite intending to, I found myself studying philosophy—not the easiest of disciplines in which to preserve a religious faith. We were taught to study reality through language, and there was a lingering skepticism about the intelligibility of religious belief. One of the first books I read was A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, a remarkable work written in the 1930s at the height of Logical Positivism, in which in a mere twenty pages he dismissed the whole of metaphysics, morals and religion as meaningless. If sentences were to make sense, he argued, they had to be testable either by logic or direct experience. Religion failed on both counts. You couldn't prove the existence of God. Nor could you experience a being who, by definition, lay beyond the physical world of the senses.[1]

The sixties were the years of liberation, when the young seemed to have all the answers, and the wisdom of the past, which once seemed so solid, turned out on closer inspection to be a cardboard facade that blew away in the wind. *The Times* of London, caught up in Beatlemania, compared the songs of Paul McCartney to German *lieder.* The distinguished Cambridge anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach, delivering the Reith Lectures on the BBC, announced that "far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all discontents."[2] All the established conventions were crumbling before our eyes. Within a few years the liberal revolution confirmed what philosophy taught—that there were no rules, only preferences. Moral judgments were expressions of subjective emotion, not objective truths.

The university seemed like a microcosm of the universe. Here was every kind of student, from every kind of background, studying every subject in every conceivable way. What mattered was critical intelligence, the ability to question everything, accepting no answer on the basis of authority or age or tradition or revelation. Reality was confined to facts and inferences. Everything else was choice. You could be anything, do anything, intellectually and existentially. My parents' world seemed long ago and far away. These were heady days, and I was at the heart of it.

Then, in May, we began to hear disturbing news from the Middle East. The Egyptians had blocked the Gulf of Akaba. They demanded the withdrawal of the United Nations troops, who instantly complied. War was in the air. The State of Israel was exposed to attack on all fronts. A catastrophe seemed to be in the making. I, who had not lived through the

1. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Dover, New York, n.d., 102–119.
2. E. R. Leach, *A Runaway World?*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1968, 44.

Holocaust nor even thought much about it, became suddenly aware that a second tragedy might be about to overtake the Jewish people.

It was then that an extraordinary thing began to happen. Throughout the university Jews suddenly became visible. Day after day they crowded into the little synagogue in the center of town. Students and dons who had never before publicly identified as Jews could be found there praying. Others began collecting money. Everyone wanted to help in some way, to express their solidarity, their identification with Israel's fate. It was some time before we realized that the same phenomenon was repeating itself throughout the world. From the United States to the Soviet Union, Jews were riveted to their television screens or radios, anxious to hear the latest news, involved, on edge, as if it were their own lives that were at stake. The rest is history. The war was fought and won. It lasted a mere six days, one of the most spectacular victories in modern history. We could celebrate and breathe safely again. Life went back to normal.

But not completely. For I had witnessed something in those days and weeks that didn't make sense in the rest of my world. It had nothing to do with politics or war or even prayer. It had to do with Jewish identity. Collectively the Jewish people had looked in the mirror and said, We are still Jews. And by that they meant more than a private declaration of faith, "religion" in the conventional sense of the word. It meant that they felt part of a people, involved in its fate, implicated in its destiny, caught up in its tragedy, exhilarated by its survival. I had felt it. So had every other Jew I knew.

Why? The Israelis were not people I knew. They were neither friends nor relatives in any literal sense. Israel was a country two thousand miles away, which I had visited once but in which I had no plans to live. Yet I had no doubt that their danger was something I felt personally. It was then that I knew that being Jewish was not something private and personal but something collective and historical. It meant being part of an extended family, many of whose members I did not know, but to whom I nonetheless felt connected by bonds of kinship and responsibility.

It made no sense at all in the concepts and categories of the 1960s. That was when I first realized that being Jewish was an exceptionally odd thing to be, structurally odd. Jewish identity was not simply a truth or set of truths I could accept or reject. It was not a preference I could express or disavow. It was not a faith I could adopt or leave alone. I had not chosen it. It had chosen me. Everything I had studied in modern philosophy, everything I had experienced in contemporary culture, told me that truth was universal and all else was individual—personal preference, autonomous choice. But what I had experienced was neither universal nor individual. Jewish identity was not, nor did it aspire to be, the universal human condition. Nor had I chosen it. It was something I was born into. But how can anyone truly be born into specific obligations and responsibilities without their consent? Logically it didn't add up. Yet psychologically it did. Without any conscious decision I was reminded that merely by being born into the Jewish people I was enmeshed in a network of relationships that connected me to other people, other places, other times. I belonged to a people. And being part of a people, I belonged.

It didn't make sense in terms of twentieth-century thought. Yet it made eminent sense in the language of Jewish tradition. Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai, a teacher of the second century, had likened the Jewish people to a single body with a single soul: "When one of them is injured, they all feel pain."[3] The rabbis of that time defined the moral obligation behind the metaphor. They said, *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh,* "All Jews are responsible for one another."[4] And behind both of these statements was a much more ancient memory of the covenant undertaken by the Israelites in the desert at the foot of Mount Sinai inwhich they pledged themselves to a collective existence as a people under the sovereignty of God.

What I discovered in those emotional days of the summer of 1967—perhaps what each of us discovers when Jewish identity takes us by surprise—is that this covenant is still alive. It still had the power to move and transform me and my contemporaries—more power, perhaps, than any of us had suspected until then. But how? I was moved by curiosity to find out more about the horizontal links that bind Jews to one another and the vertical links binding us to a history and

3. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* to Exodus 19:6; ed. by J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, Jerusalem, n.d., 139.
4. Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 27b, *Shevuot* 39a.

a hope. That was how I found myself asking the question Isaac Arama had asked five hundred years before. The search has taken up much of my life since then, because the question, once asked, does not go away.

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Years after I left Cambridge, I found myself watching a television documentary about the great Egyptian temples. They had been built some three thousand three hundred years ago by the pharaoh assumed by most scholars to be the ruler at the time of the Exodus: Ramses II. Lovingly, the camera took us on a tour of those magnificent buildings, at Luxor, Karnak and Abu Simbel. The commentator spoke about their magnificence, their scale, their beauty, their sheer endurance across the millennia. They still stand, in little less than their former glory, defying time.

For twenty minutes or so I was carried along by his enthusiasm. Then I found myself asking what survives today of the Egypt of the pharaohs—the greatest, most powerful and by far the most long-lived of the empires of the ancient world? The buildings, the temples and the monuments remain, but not the people, the faith or the civilization. Already in the reign of Ramses II, the Egypt of the pharaohs had reached its peak. After his death it would begin its decline. By the time of the Alexandrian empire, ancient Egyptian culture had run its course. It had lasted many centuries, but like most other civilizations it had proved all too mortal. The stones remained; the world they celebrated was no more.

It occurred to me that among the builders of those temples must have been some of my ancestors. They were slaves in Egypt at the time. The Bible tells us that they were employed to build the cities of Pithom (Per-Atum) and Ramses, two of Ramses II's greatest projects. The contrast between the people and the king could not have been greater. The slaves were known as Hebrews, perhaps from the ancient word *Habiru.* They were, as the name implies, nomads, immigrants. They were *Ivrim,* meaning those who journey from place to place. In Egypt they had become slaves. They had no power, no wealth, no rights, no freedom. They were, of all people, the lowest of the low.

Egypt, at the time, was an indomitable power. Not only was it a country of immense technical prowess, but it ruled the entire region of the Middle East. Ramses was not so much served as a king; he was worshiped as a god. Colossal statues of him were to be found throughout the country. The prefix *Ra* tells us that he was seen as the sun god. This explains an otherwise puzzling feature of the biblical story of the Exodus. The ten plagues that struck Egypt mounted in a rising scale of devastation, a sequence broken by the ninth, darkness, which seems less like an affliction than an inconvenience. The ninth plague, we now understand, was a judgment, not against the people but its most significant deity, the Pharaoh who saw himself as the god of the sun.

Suppose that we could travel back in time and tell the inhabitants of those days that it would not be the Egypt of the pharaohs, its empire and dynasty, that would survive. It would instead be that nation of slaves, known to others as Hebrews, to themselves as the children of Israel, and to later history as the Jews. Nothing would have struck them as more absurd. Indeed, the earliest known reference to the Israelites outside the Bible is an inscription on the Merneptah stele, a giant slab of black granite dating from the thirteenth century B.C.E. It reads, "Israel is laid waste. His seed is no more." Not only would the Egyptians not have believed that the people Israel would survive, they believed that they were already on the verge of extinction. Ancient Egypt and ancient Israel, therefore, seem to stand at opposite extremes of the great gamble we take with time. What endures and what wanes? What survives and what is eclipsed? It is a question we can never answer in advance, only in retrospect. But retrospect is what we have.

Egypt and Israel three millennia ago were nations that asked themselves the most fundamental human question of all: How do we defeat death and conquer mortality? How, in the brief span of a human life, do we participate in something that will endure long after we are no longer here? The Egyptians gave one answer—an answer that through the ages has tempted emperors and tyrants, rulers and kings. We defeat mortality by building monuments that will stand for thousands of years. Their stones will outlive the winds and sands of time. The Jews gave an entirely different answer.

The Israelites, slaves in Egypt for more than two hundred years, were about to go free. Ten plagues had struck the country. Whatever their cause, they seemed to convey a message: The God of Israel is on the side of freedom and human

dignity. On the brink of their release, Moses, the leader of the Jews, gathered them together and prepared to address them. He might have spoken about freedom. He could have given a stirring address about the promised land to which they were traveling, the "land flowing with milk and honey." Or he might have prepared them for the journey that lay ahead, the long march across the wilderness.

Instead, Moses delivered a series of addresses that seemed to make no sense in the context of that particular moment. He presented a new idea, revolutionary in character, whose implications remain challenging even now. He spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. Three times he turned to the theme:

> And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say …[5]
>
> And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'[6]
>
> And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him …[7]

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

Freedom, Moses suggested, 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. The citadels of liberty are houses of study. Its heroes are teachers, its passion is education and the life of the mind. Moses realized that a people achieves immortality not by building temples 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. They saw God not as the power that enslaves but as the power that sets free. Instead of worshiping mighty rulers they affirmed the dignity of the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the vulnerable, the weak and the neglected. In that counterintuitive reversal they discovered the secret of eternity. Whether through accident or design or something greater than either, the Hebrew slaves who built Ramses' temples had lived through one of the great revelations of history. These were our ancestors, and we are their heirs.

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Was I right or wrong to see in this story something out of the ordinary? Only later did I discover that three other people, none of them Jews, had shared my own sense of amazement and had been persuaded by it that somewhere in the tale of Jewish survival was a mystery of great significance. Each of them, for different reasons, had been led to reflect on the nature of history. Each had been startled into a discovery that there was one people whose history broke all the rules.

The first was Blaise Pascal, a mathematician and physicist in the seventeenth century who invented the first digital calculator and the syringe, and discovered Pascal's law of pressure and the principle of the hydraulic press. More significantly, he was the founder of the modern theory of probability. At the age of thirty he abruptly ended his scientific work and devoted the rest of his life to thinking about religious faith. His theological reflections led him to formulate what has come to be known as "Pascal's wager," the idea that under conditions of uncertainty we have more to lose by disbelieving

5. Exodus 12:26–27.
6. Exodus 13:8.
7. Exodus 13:14.

than by believing in God. However, Pascal also applied the idea of probability to history and came to a striking conclusion: that among all the myriad peoples that have lived on earth, only one defies probability:

> It is certain that in certain parts of the world we can see a peculiar people, separated from the other peoples of the world, and this is called the Jewish people … This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singularly long time … For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens and Rome, and others who came so much later have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out, as their historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things over such a long spell of years. They have always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold … My encounter with this people amazes me …[8]

In *War and Peace* Leo Tolstoy also wrestled with the question of the meaning of history. Is the course of events determined by the decisions of great leaders and military commanders? Or is there some deeper underlying thread of meaning, a destiny whose outline can be discerned beneath the surface of apparently random happenings? Critics have often been irritated by Tolstoy's philosophizing, which cuts across the vivid drama of the novel, the fate of five aristocratic families set against the panoramic background of Napoleon's invasion of Russia. Yet Tolstoy was driven by a conviction that there is a moral and spiritual dimension to history, and this idea left him no peace. At the height of his career, having completed *Anna Karenina,* he abandoned his life as an aristocrat and started living the life of a peasant, devoted to faith, love, and the virtues of simplicity. One of the things that, for him, proved the existence of a mysterious and providential pattern in history was the story of the Jews:

> 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.[9]

The third figure, Nicolay Berdyayev, was one of the great thinkers of the Russian Revolution. The destiny of civilizations, he believed, was ruled by material forces, economies, wars, the physical indices of power. Something happened, though, to make him change his mind. In his study of history he came across one people whose fate could not be accounted for in these terms—the Jewish people. Their existence and survival was a refutation of Marxist theory. This discovery changed Berdyayev's life. He became religious. He no longer believed in materialism but instead in the "light which breaks through from the transcendent world of the spirit." Eventually, he was expelled from Russia and spent the rest of his life in Berlin and Paris, teaching religion. In *The Meaning of History,* he tells how he made his discovery:

> 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.[10]

Here were three people whose lives were changed by their encounter with the Jewish story. Judaism confirmed their own religious faith and suggested to them the important idea that God might be found not only in nature but in history.

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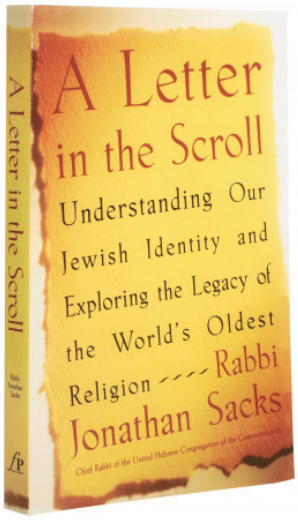
8. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, 171, 176–77.
9. Quoted in Hertz, *A Book of Jewish Thoughts*, 136.
10. Quoted in Isadore Twersky, "Survival, Normalcy, Modernity," in *Zionism in Transition*, Moshe Davis (ed.), Arno Press, New York, 1980, 349.

And if we search for revelation in history, we will find it, more compellingly than anywhere else, in the history of that unusual people, our ancestors. For almost two thousand years Jews remained a distinctive nation without any of the usual prerequisites of nationhood. They had no land, no sovereignty, no power, no overarching political structures, not even a shared culture. They were scattered over the face of the earth, and almost everywhere they were a minority. For the most part, they refused active efforts to convert them and resisted the passive pull of assimilation. No other people kept its identity intact for so long in such circumstances.

And so I came back to the question that had perplexed me in my student days, and five centuries earlier had troubled Rabbi Isaac Arama. I was heir to this history. But what claim did it lay on me? In what sense did it represent my own identity, not as a fact but as a value, not as the story of a past but as a duty to the future? With this I come to the first of the three questions I want to answer: *How does where I come from tell me who I am called on to be?*



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