Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Why I Am a Jew

A Chapter from *Radical Then, Radical Now*

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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Why I Am a Jew
A Chapter from *Radical Then, Radical Now*
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bravery, courage, leadership, dedication, sacrifice, faith,
love of people, and love of country.

These qualities were epitomized by

Yossi Hershkovitz הי"ד

who fell in battle in Gaza

Yossi was the beloved principal
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with a message of faith during times of crisis
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Jonathan Sacks

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Why I Am a Jew

"Some people like the Jews, and some do not," said Winston Churchill. "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."[1] I have tried to say what it means to me to be part of that people. Jewry survived while every empire that sought its destruction has ceased to be. In our own time, it has passed through the worst crime of man against man, the Holocaust, and yet still it affirms life. Today the Jewish people are not old. If anything they are young. The State of Israel in a mere half century has achieved things for which there is no comparison in any of the hundred or more new states that have come into being in the United Nations since the end of the Second World War. To be part of that history is a rare and precious heritage, and one of which I am proud.

Albert Einstein once said, "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 I belong to it."[2] I share his sense of gratitude. It is more than thirty years since I began my own personal journey toward faith, and time and again I have been enthralled by the discoveries I have made along the way. Judaism is an adult faith. It does not call for the suspension of disbelief or what *Alice in Wonderland's* Queen described as "believing six impossible things before breakfast."[3] Surely no religion has more actively encouraged the asking of questions, above all within the *yeshivah*, the citadel of traditional Jewish learning. Rabbi Abraham Twerski describes

1. Quoted in Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Controversy of Zion* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), XI.
2. Albert Einstein, "Jewish Ideals," in *Modern Jewish Thought: A Source Reader*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 116.
3. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, ch. 5.

a moment familiar to anyone who has spent time in such an environment. When he was young, his instructor would relish challenges to his arguments, the more forceful the better. In his broken English he would say, "You right! You a hundred prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong."[4] And there is a moving honesty about the Jewish mind. Despite the formidable intellectual energies Jews have devoted throughout the centuries to interpreting the will and word of God, they rarely wrote systematic theologies. They prayed to God and argued with Him, but they did not try to fit Him into the finite categories of human thought. They never forgot that God is more like a person than a concept, and therefore there will always be much about Him that eludes understanding.

And then there is the immense moral energy at the core of Jewish life, that "almost fanatical love of justice" that connects Abraham and Moses with the Jewish civil rights and anti-apartheid activists of more recent times. I have tried, in this book, to trace it back to the haunting image of the palace in flames, and to the tension between the world as it is and as it ought to be, that only action can resolve. The late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the outstanding Orthodox thinkers of the twentieth century, recounts an occasion when his grandfather, Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk, was asked what the function of a rabbi is. Without hesitation he replied, "To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hands of his oppressor."[5] Why is it that this answer does not surprise us, yet coming from an Oxford or Harvard professor it might? "Reb Hayyim," as he was known, was one of the legendary scholars of the Volozhyn *yeshivah* in the nineteenth century, and yet Judaism's houses of study were rarely detached from social concern for the community as a whole. It was well known that Reb Hayyim would give away most of his salary to the poor and leave his wood store unlocked so that anyone needing fuel could come and take it. When his lay leaders complained about the cost, he replied that in that case he would have to instruct his wife never to light the fire because he could not sit in the warmth while the poor went cold.[6] There is a direct line between Reb Hayyim and the 50 percent of California Jews who, when asked what being Jewish meant to them, replied "social justice" – three times the figure for any other factor.[7] The restless drive to "perfect the world under the sovereignty of God" is a Jewish instinct that survives long after other practices have been abandoned.

4. Abraham J. Twerski, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Traditional Press, 1989), 20–21.
5. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 91.
6. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, 129.
7. *Los Angeles Times*, "Israel and the Palestinian Problem," study no. 149, 1988.

Was it the insistence on the absolute transcendence of God that allowed Jews to see the human situation so clearly, understanding both our smallness and potential greatness as "partners with the Holy One, blessed be He, in the work of creation"? Unlike Christianity, Judaism is not a religion of salvation. We do not believe that we stand under the shadow of "original sin" and therefore need to be saved. Nor, like so many secular systems from ancient Greece to today, do we see the individual as fundamentally alone in a sea of hostile, or at best indifferent, forces. It is not that these are untenable views; they have given rise to major civilizations. Yet it would be hard to find another people who, over time, have endowed the human individual with more dignity and responsibility. Perhaps that is why, although Jewry has always been small – today, a mere quarter of a percent of the population of the world – its impact has been so disproportionate to its numbers. Judaism expects great things of its adherents; a people who saw themselves as a "kingdom of priests" could do no less. And high expectations give rise to high achievements.

I once asked Paul Johnson, the Catholic writer from whose *A History of the Jews* I have quoted more than once, what he most admired about Judaism. He replied that no other faith or culture had managed so well the balance between individual and collective responsibility, summarized in Hillel's famous aphorism, "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am only for myself, what am I?"[8] It was, he said, an extraordinarily difficult balance to achieve; most other cultures had slid, at some time or other, into excessive individualism or oppressive collectivism. It was a wise observation, and as I have reflected on it over the years it seems to me that Judaism, from its earliest days, understood the way character is formed, as a series of outward movements from family to community to people to humanity as a whole. We were blessed by not having the overly abstract imagination of the Greeks. Jews did not think in terms of disembodied categories like "the individual" and "the collective." We are both. We grow as individuals through our moral connectedness to others, and surely no religion has endowed the vehicles of that connectedness – the home, the school, the congregation, the sense of kinship with a people scattered through time and space – with a more carefully orchestrated beauty. We are a people of strong individuals; no one who has attended a Jewish committee meeting could believe otherwise. And yet even the most unaffiliated Jew feels a strong sense of responsibility to others, as one sees whenever Israel or some other Jewish community is under threat.

I believe that Judaism got it right about the big questions: God and mankind, the universal and the particular, the individual and society, education and the life of the

8. Mishnah Avot 1:14.

mind, justice and compassion, human dignity and equality, being part of yet apart from the wider society in which we are set. I am not a social Darwinian, yet I believe that Jews and Judaism would not have survived for so long, under such varied and often adverse conditions, without having discovered some profound set of truths about the human condition. From the earliest days, with no obvious facts to support them, our ancestors were convinced that the vision by which they felt themselves addressed would endure as long as man walked the earth; and thus far they have been proved correct. The covenantal drama, for all its improbability, has unfolded more or less as they said it would. If this is not a proof, then at least it is an intimation, that Jewish history has been a scroll through which God, in distinctive handwriting, has sent a message to mankind.

I cannot hide my sense that something is wrong with Jewish life today. I see it in almost every direction I look. It is not only that young Jews are disengaging from Judaism at a rate virtually unprecedented in history. Nor is it the grievous and unnecessary factiousness that injures the relationships between the various Jewish groups, religious and secular, Orthodox and liberal, and the different strands within Orthodoxy itself. It is, rather, an inescapable feeling that we have somehow lost the script of the Jewish story, that breathtaking attempt to build, out of simple acts and ordinary lives, a fragment of heaven on earth, a society of human dignity under the sovereignty of God, a home for the Divine presence.

Never in the past two thousand years have the opportunities been greater or the stakes so high. In Israel, for the first time since the days of the Romans, Jews have the chance to build a society and culture along Jewish lines. The Jewish people has its own nation-state, set in the landscape of the prophets, resonating to the language of the Bible and surrounded by visible reminders of its history. In most countries of the Diaspora, Jews have won more than equality and civil rights; they are among its most highly achieving groups. Besides this, and partly as a result of the impact of the Holocaust on the West, most liberal democracies today are self-consciously pluralist, multiethnic and religiously diverse. That does not mean that antisemitism no longer exists; it does. But neither now nor in the foreseeable future can it hold center stage in the political arena. The days when die *Judenfrage*, "the Jewish question," dominated dinner-table conversations in Europe are gone.

Times without number I have been surprised by the admiration non-Jews have for Jewish life. Perhaps, as a Chief Rabbi, I have had unusual opportunities to see this at first hand. I have studied Torah with the future king of England and with its present prime minister. I have had close relationships with archbishops and cardinals, and been

approached for guidance by non-Jewish groups throughout the world, from labor organizers in the United States to mineworkers in South Africa to government ministers and leaders of the British armed forces. These have all been people who have had no special reason to be interested in Judaism, yet they are. They see it as a source of wisdom and as a set of institutions of compelling strength. They respect the closeness of a Jewish family, the warmth of the Jewish home, our passion for education, our commitment to *tzedakah*, giving to others. They are aware of the Jewish contribution to almost every aspect of modern culture and are fascinated by that awe-inspiring capacity to retain a sense of humor in the midst, and without diminishing the depth, of Jewish suffering. They cannot understand why Jews would wish to relinquish this heritage. Neither can I, which is why I have written this book.

Perhaps in the end it comes down to faith. Jews were and are a people whose identity makes sense, in the long run, only in religious terms, albeit terms which are unique among the religions of the world. We are not, nor can we predicate our survival on remaining, an ethnic group, a secular culture, or a constellation of fading memories, a benign but undemanding nostalgia. Each of these can provide the basis of an identity, but it is one that has a life span of at most three generations, and already most of our children are four generations removed from the *shtetl*, the *heim* and the world of "tradition." Ethnicity carries no obligations. Culture does not command. Memory, in and of itself, does not ask of us that we commit ourselves to perpetuating what it is we remember. That is why groups built on these foundations inevitably disappear over time.

Judaism was always larger than this, one of the noblest dreams ever to take hold of the human imagination – the idea that God, in His lonely singularity, might reach out to an individual, then to a nation, in its lonely singularity, proposing a partnership whereby, deed by deed and generation by generation, together they might fashion a living example of what it is to honor the humanity of God and the image of God that is the human person. And as long as Jews were Jews, living by the word of God, a light did radiate in their collective lives, the light we call the *Shekhinah*, the Divine indwelling presence, that bathes a Shabbat table or a family conversation with its beauty and a sense of eternity in the here-and-now.

Can we ever really know whether faith is justified? Do we, citizens of modernity and post-modernity, not take for granted what Hume, Kant and Nietzsche labored to establish, that the existence of God cannot be proved? And do we not as Jews – always inclined to rationality, and now chastened and chilled by the Holocaust – have more reason to doubt than most? Yet I have to admit, even as a professionally trained philosopher, that I am unmoved by this whole trend of thought, rendered trivial by its own

circularity. Of course it is possible to live a life without God, just as it is possible to live a life without humor, or music, or love; and one can no more prove that God exists than one can prove these other things exist to those who lack a sense of humor, or to whom Schubert is mere noise, or love a figment of the romantic imagination. The late Sir Isaiah Berlin used to say to me, in his sonorous voice and with a mischievous smile, "Chief Rabbi, don't talk to me about faith. When it comes to God, I'm *tone-deaf*." I never argued the point with him: at the age of eighty, I felt he was entitled to his agnosticism. But on reflection I see I should have done so. He had striven to appreciate music and poetry, Russian literature and the history of ideas. He knew that one can live a life without these things, but it will be a smaller, more circumscribed and impoverished life. How much more so in the case of faith.

Jewish faith is not a metaphysical wager, a leap into the improbable. It is the courage to see the world as it is, without the comfort of myth or the self-pity of despair, knowing that the evil, cruelty and injustice it contains are neither inevitable nor meaningless but instead a call to human responsibility – a call emanating from the heart of existence itself. The political commentator William Safire comes to a powerful conclusion at the end of his study of the Book of Job. It is a book, he writes, with no easy answers. Yet it remains "the greatest form of solace and source of strength," because its message is that "no matter how solitary the confinement, the individual human being is not alone in the universe."[9] Jewish faith is false only if we are wrong to believe in the objective reality of all that is personal. No religion has given God a more human face, or humanity a more awesome challenge, or history a more hope-laden script. None has more deeply challenged us, its guardians, to grow; and none has paid greater respect to critical intelligence and human responsibility.

I believe that at a certain point in history – it happened at different times in different countries – Jews lost their faith in God and placed their trust in man. That, of course, has been the story of Western civilization as a whole, but it happened to Jews more suddenly and poignantly than to anyone else. They had suffered long and hard for their convictions. Lacking power for centuries, they had begun to see religious faith as passive, a reliance of man on God, rather than what it was for the patriarchs and prophets, the call of God to man. Now, beginning with the French Revolution, a new secular dispensation seemed to answer their prayers, and they invested it with all the hopes of a profoundly religious people. Alasdair MacIntyre once pointed out that there are two types of atheist, one who simply does not believe, and one who disbelieves with an almost religious

9. William Safire, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992), 226.

fervor.[10] Of the latter kind, a disproportionate number – they include Spinoza, Marx and Freud – have been Jews.

It turned out to be the wrong choice. Jews found themselves caught between the lure of Emancipation and the double bind of antisemitism, and out of that vortex came both the nightmare and the dream of modern Jewish life: the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. The outward story of those years is engraved in every Jewish mind, but the inner story is more tempestuous and not yet resolved. When Jews began to define themselves horizontally, in terms of their relationship to those around them, they found themselves prey to a range of syndromes from insecurity to aggression, from self-hatred to a narrow ethnic pride. Collective traumas of this magnitude take several generations to play themselves out, and we still live with their aftershocks. Like Jacob after his wrestling match with the angel, we limp.

Jewish identity, I believe, can never be merely horizontal, synchronic, secular, untouched by the still, small voice of eternity and destiny. We are a vertical people, linked through a covenantal bond to the past, the future, and to heaven itself. G. K. Chesterton once said that the United States was the only nation ever to be built on a creed.[11] He was wrong: the Jewish people were conceived and born on the basis of a belief, articulated at Mount Sinai, made explicit in the Torah, and realized in more than a hundred generations of individual lives. Take that away, and Jewish identity loses its coherence as surely as would the United States if Americans forgot the phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." To be a Jew is to be part of the ongoing dialogue between earth and heaven that has persisted for two-thirds of the recorded history of civilization and whose theme is as urgent now as at any time in the past: to build a society that honors the human person in our differences and commonalities, our singularity and interdependence. Rarely have we needed it more than in our present age of Promethean technological powers, and seldom has its power been more evident than now as, throughout the West, families, communities, the moral sense itself, have come under assault.

Above all – and this has been my central theme – Judaism is not a theory, a system, a set of speculative propositions, an "ism." It is a call, and it bears our name. Unlike the other great monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, and equally unlike the philosophies of the Greeks and their successors, Judaism is not a truth addressed to all mankind. It is a summons to us, mediated through more than a hundred generations of our ancestors, written in the history of their lives and now confronting us as our heritage and responsibility. One of the most profound religious truths Judaism ever articulated was that God

10. lasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London: Duckworth, 1971), 12–13.
11. G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 7.

loves diversity; He does not ask us all to serve Him in the same way. To each people He has set a challenge, and with the Jewish people He made a covenant, knowing that it takes time, centuries, millennia, to overcome the conflicts and injustices of the human situation, and that therefore each generation must hand on its ideals to the next, so that there will always be a Jewish people conveying its particular vision to humanity and moving, however haltingly, to a more gracious world. The most eloquent words God spoke to Abraham, Jacob, Moses and the prophets was to call their name. Their reply was simply *Hineni*, "Here I am." That is the call Jewish history makes to us: to continue the story and to write our letter in the scroll.

Why, then, am I a Jew? Not because I believe that Judaism contains all there is of the human story. 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. I admire the traditions that brought them forth. *Aval zeh shelanu*. But this is ours. Nor am I a Jew because of antisemitism 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 moral 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 that 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, then, 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 today it still challenges the moral imagination of mankind. I want to say to my children: 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.

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About the Author

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020) was a global religious leader, philosopher, award-winning author, and respected moral voice. He was the laureate of the 2016 Templeton Prize in recognition of his "exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension." Described by HM King Charles III as "a light unto this nation" and by former British Prime Minister Sir Tony Blair as "an intellectual giant," Rabbi Sacks was a frequent and sought-after contributor to radio, television, and the press, both in Britain and around the world.

After achieving first-class honours in philosophy at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, he pursued post-graduate studies in Oxford and London, gaining his doctorate in 1981 and receiving rabbinic ordination from Jews' College and Yeshivat Etz Chaim. He served as the rabbi for Golders Green Synagogue and Marble Arch Synagogue in London before becoming principal of Jews' College (now the London School of Jewish Studies).

He served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth for twenty-two years, between 1991 and 2013. He held seventeen honorary degrees, including a Doctor of Divinity conferred to mark his first ten years in office as Chief Rabbi, by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey.

In recognition of his work, Rabbi Sacks won several international awards, including the Jerusalem Prize in 1995 for his contribution to Diaspora Jewish life, the Ladislaus Laszt Ecumenical and Social Concern Award from Ben-Gurion University in Israel in 2011, the Guardian of Zion Award from the Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies at Bar-Ilan University, and the Katz Award in recognition of his contribution to

the practical analysis and application of halakha in modern life in Israel in 2014. He was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen in 2005 and made a Life Peer, taking his seat in the House of Lords in October 2009.

The author of more than forty books, Rabbi Sacks published a new English translation and commentary for the *Koren Sacks Siddur*, the first new Orthodox siddur in a generation, as well as powerful commentaries for the Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, Pesaḥ, Shavuot, and Sukkot Maḥzorim. A number of his books have won literary awards. *Not in God's Name* was awarded a 2015 National Jewish Book Award in America and was a top ten Sunday Times bestseller in the UK. Others include *The Dignity of Difference*, winner of the Grawemeyer Award in Religion in 2004 for its success in defining a framework for interfaith dialogue between people of all faiths and of none, and National Jewish Book Awards for *A Letter in the Scroll* in 2000, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis* in 2009, and the *Koren Sacks Pesaḥ Maḥzor* in 2013. His Covenant & Conversation commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, which are translated into numerous languages, including Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese, and Turkish, are read in Jewish communities around the world.

Rabbi Sacks was married to Elaine for fifty years. They have three children and several grandchildren.

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