

A Letter in the Scroll / Radical Then; Radical Now

Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion

Preface

TODAY THROUGHOUT THE DIASPORA one Jew in two is either marrying out, or not marrying, or in some other way deciding not to create a Jewish home, have Jewish children, and continue the Jewish story.

At such moments-rare in our history-we, or our children, face the question, Who am I and why should I remain a Jew? That question can never be answered in the abstract. It is intensely personal and demands a personal reply.

This is my personal reply. None of us can answer this question for anyone else. But it sometimes helps to know how other people have thought about it, which is why I have decided to publish this book as an open letter to the next generation.

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#1 A Letter in The Scroll. Page 43-44

We in a vast library. In every direction we look there are bookcases. Each has shelves stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and every shelf is full of books. We are surrounded by the recorded thoughts of many people, some great, some less so, and we can reach out and take any book we wish. All we have to do is choose. We begin to read... we can break off and try a different subject, a different approach, there is no limit. Once the book no longer interests us, we can put it back on the shelf, where it will wait for the next reader to pick it up. It makes no claim on us. It is just a book. That, for the contemporary secular culture of the West, is what identity is like. We are browsers in the library. There are many different ways of living, and none exercises any particular claim on us. As browsers, though, we remain intact, untouched.

Judaism asks us to envisage an altogether different possibility. Imagine that, while browsing in the library, you come across one book unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in many languages. You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name.

... Were I to find myself holding such a book in my hands, my life would already have been changed. Seeing my name and the story my forebears, I could not read it as if it were just one story among others; instead, reading it would inevitably become, for me, a form of self-discovery. Once I knew that it existed, I could not put the book back on the shelf and forget it, because I would now know that I am part of a long line of people who travelled toward a certain destination and whose journey remains unfinished, dependent on me to take it further.

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me.

#2 A Letter in the Scroll pg. 206-212

Please read on your own:

There are many opinions as to the identity of Jacob's mysterious adversary. The simplest and deepest is that **it was Jacob himself**, and that **his greatest struggle was internal. Would he spend his life wishing he were someone else, or would he at last be content to be who he was?** His struggle ended when he was able to let go of all the things he had clung to in the past. According to this reading, **Jacob became Israel when he learned to be proud to be Jacob. No longer holding on to Esau's heel**, his blessing, his identity, his name, Jacob finally conquered his sense inadequacy and learned to be himself. For the first time he could meet his brother without envy, deception or fear. The next morning, the brothers meet and the conflict between them seems to have disappeared.

They kiss, speak in friendship, and each goes his way in peace. **If Jacob has the courage to be Jacob, then he has conquered his fear of Esau.**

This scene has often replayed itself at critical junctures in Jewish history. Time and again Jews confronted nations larger than themselves, more powerful, more secure, more at home in the world—ancient Egypt and Persia, Greece and Rome, Europe of the Enlightenment—and each time there were Jews who were not sure they wanted to be Jews. They assimilated or Hellenized or secularized. Each of these encounters was a collective crisis of Jewish identity, a paralyzing self-doubt. Jews did not want to belong to the club that would have them as a member. They were Jacobs who did not want to be Jacob.

... I recall three such primal scenes that made a difference to my own life. Once, when I was a child, my family was on holiday in a little coastal town in the south of England. It was Shabbat and we had just left the synagogue and were walking back for lunch. Behind us, another member of the congregation came rushing up and pointed to the yarmulka I was wearing. He said to my father, "Your son has forgotten to take his yarmulka off." This was in the days when it was not done to wear overt signs of your Jewishness in public. The old dictum "Be a Jew at home and a man in the street" was still in force. By walking down the road with my head covering I was committing a solecism, and our friend from the synagogue assumed, not unnaturally, that I was unaware of it. He meant it kindly. He was simply trying to save me from embarrassment, much as if my shirttail had been hanging out. For once my father got angry and replied, "**No child of mine will ever be ashamed to be Jewish in public.**" And we continued on our way. It was not a very tactful response, but it taught me—as perhaps no more formal lesson could **never to be ashamed of who I was.**

The second event took place several years later. I was a student ...I now felt the pull of spirituality as never before. But could I really embrace this life, which seemed so narrow after the broad expanses of Western culture? Where in this world was there a place for Mozart and Milton, Beethoven and Shakespeare! Where in this focused existence was there room for the glittering achievements of the European mind? I wrote a note to the Rebbe and told him of my conflict. I wanted to live more fully as a Jew, but at the same time I was reluctant to give up my love of art and literature, music and poetry, most of which had been created by non Jews and had nothing to do with Judaism.

The Rebbe wrote me back an answer in the form of a parable. Imagine, he said, two people, both of whom have spent their lives carrying stones. One carries rocks, the other diamonds. Now imagine that they are both asked to carry a consignment of emeralds. To the man who has spent his life transporting rocks, emeralds too are rocks—a burden, a weight. After a lifetime, that is how he sees what he is asked to carry. But to the man who has spent his life carrying diamonds, emeralds too are precious stones—different, to be sure, but still things of value and beauty. So it is. he said, with different civilizations and faiths. To the person for whom faith is just a burden, so too are other faiths. He does not value his own. How then can he value someone else's? But to the person to whom his own faith is precious, so too are others. Because he cherishes his own, he values someone else's. His may be diamonds, the other emeralds, but he sees the beauty in each. So, the Rebbe ended, in most cases if not all you will find that your attachment to Judaism will heighten your appreciation of the gifts of other cultures.

In other words, the more deeply you value what is yours, the more you will value the achievements of others. This was a marvellous reply. More important, it was true, as I discovered

many times as the years passed. I found that **those who are most at ease in their own faith have a capacity to recognize moral and spiritual greatness in whatever form it takes**. Secure in their identity, confident in their beliefs, they have an openness and generosity that allows them to respond to other people and other languages of the spirit.

The third moment took place when I had finished university and was teaching philosophy. At that time, most of my other colleagues were Marxists. Some were Jewish most not, but almost all were irreligious or antireligious. In those days I had no thought of eventually becoming a rabbi, but the lesson of my childhood had stayed with me enough to make me wear my yarmulka at all times. One particularly windy day, as I was crossing the playing fields, it blew off and instead of putting it back, I carried it until I reached the lecture room.

The next day I was summoned by the head of the department. "Is everything all right, Jonathan?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, puzzled by his question. "It's just that I saw you yesterday crossing the playing field not wearing your skullcap, and I wondered whether anything had happened." It was an astonishing moment. I suddenly realized that though he was not Jewish, he was deeply troubled at the thought that I might be losing my faith—whether out of philosophical doubt or the sheer isolation of being the only religious Jew on campus. I don't know if even now I fully understand his reaction, but I think it meant that my being true to my faith was part of the security of his world....

Since then, I have encountered this phenomenon so many times in different ways that I am tempted to assert it in the form of two principles which, if not always true, are true more often than not:

Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism, and they are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.

#3 A Palace in Flames

בראשית רבתה לט:א

"וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לְךָ לֵךְ מִארְצֶךָ וְגֹן" ר' יצחק פתח (תהלים מה, יא) ... אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עבר מקום למקום וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה זו بلا מנהיג הציבור עליו בעל הבירה אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה בר לפיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה بلا מנהיג הציבור עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם

"The Lord said to Abram: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house . . ." To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. He wondered, "Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?" The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." So Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."

...

With this we arrive at the starting point of Jewish faith, **radical then, radical now**, perhaps still not fully understood Faith is born not in the answer but in the question, not in harmony but in dissonance. If God created the world, then He created man. Why then does He allow man to destroy the world? How are we to reconcile the order of nature with the disorder of society? Can God have made the world only to abandon it?

From time immemorial to the present, there have always been two ways of seeing the world. The first says, **There is no God**. There are contending forces, chance and necessity, the chance that

produces variation, and the necessity that gives the strong victory over the weak. ... There is no palace. There are only flames.

The second view insists that there is God. All that exists because He made it. All that happens transpires because He willed it. Therefore all injustice is an illusion. ... Evil is the cloak that masks the good. There is a question, but there is always an answer... There is a palace. Therefore there are no flames.

... God created nature, symbolized by the palace. But God, seeking relationship, created one being capable of self-consciousness, and therefore freedom, and thus the ability to choose evil. Man, having this ability, uses it. He sets fire to the palace, setting the world aflame. God can, but may not put out the fire, for if He does so, man is no longer free.

Only man can put out the fire. But man is not alone. For God, the author of self-consciousness, is also the author of language. God not only creates, He communicates. God speaks to man and tells him how to extinguish the flames. Morality is not factual (how things are) or subjective (how desire them to be) but covenantal, meaning: God gives His word to man, and man gives his word to God. God teaches, man acts, and together they begin the task of tikkun olam, "repairing, or mending, the world." They become, in the rabbinic phrase, "partners in the work of creation." Four thousand years later, this is still a revolutionary idea. And still an unfinished task.

The faith of Judaism, beginning with Abraham, reaching its most detailed expression in the covenant of Sinai, envisioned by the prophets and articulated by the sages, is that, by acting in response to the call of God, collectively we can change the world. The flames of injustice, violence and oppression are not inevitable. The victory of the strong over the weak, the many over the few, the manipulative over those who act with integrity, even though they have happened at most times and in most places, are not written into the structure of the universe. (pgs 51-60)

#4 The Radical Ideas behind simple actions

Walk into a shop, hand over a coin, and buy a newspaper. No transaction could be simpler. You do it without thinking about it.

Yet in this one event you are living on the surface of a series of institutions that, if fully excavated, would tell half the story of mankind.

The coin tells of the long evolution of man from hunter-gatherer to city dweller, where specialization and the division of labor led to the necessity of exchange, and thus a medium of exchange, and so eventually money, first as something valuable in itself (precious metal), then as abstract token.

The newspaper speaks of a series of technological advances from writing to printing to the most modern forms of instantaneous global communication. It is also part of a political history that gave us the idea that in a free society we are entitled to open access to information.

...To be a Jew is, on the face of it, to be involved in simple things...

#6 Why I am a Jew <https://youtu.be/CAbiFbpQP8o>