Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

To Be a Jew

FAITH AND HOPE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

WITH INSPIRATIONAL STORIES
FROM ISRAEL AND BEYOND

BY SIVAN RAHAV-MEIR

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

מגיד
MAGGID

This booklet is dedicated to the cherished memory of

Irving and Toni Rosen ז"ל

Beloved father and mother, grandfather and grandmother,
great-grandfather and great-grandmother.

and to the memory of the

Soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces

who gave their lives for Am Yisrael and for Medinat Yisrael.
In their death, they commanded us to live.

In loving memory of our uncle

Pinchas Rosen הי"ד

who sacrificed his life in the War of Independence.

The Rosen Family

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders and a moral voice. Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at www.rabbisacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

Comments? Questions? Email sivanrahavmeir@gmail.com

Editors (Original Hebrew): Dr. Rakefet Ben Yishai, Hadassah Sassi
Copyeditors (Original Hebrew): Ronit Rahav, Ela Omer
Production: Gidon Katz, IMP
Editor: Sharon Gelbach
Graphic Design: Racheli Friedman
Cover Design: Tani Bayer
Cover Photo: Deah Avihayil on Ideogram

© All rights on texts by Sivan Rahav-Meir reserved to Sivan Rahav-Meir, 2024.
© All rights on Rabbi Sacks' texts are reserved to the Estate of Jonathan Sacks and Maggid Books, an imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2024.

You are welcome to photocopy and share sections of this booklet for educational purposes.

No part of this booklet may be translated, reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher, except for educational purposes. For non-commercial educational purposes, sections of this booklet may be photocopied without prior permission.

ISBN 978-159-264-695-1
Printed in the USA

Contents

Introduction **1**

Chapter One
Personal Journeys to Judaism, Discovery in Times of Crisis **9**

Chapter Two
What It Means to Be a Part of the Jewish People **21**

Chapter Three
Terror, Antisemitism, Evil: How Do We Counter Them? **41**

Chapter Four
So, What Do We Do? Practical Jewish Responses to the Crisis **58**

The End, Which is Just the Beginning **71**

Introduction

Where were you on the Saturday morning of October 7, 2023, Simchat Torah 5784? When did you first hear the devastating news from Israel? At what point did the full scope of the tragedy begin to sink in, and when did it occur to you that you'd never truly grasp the sheer horror of it?

October 7 stands as one of the darkest days in Jewish history since the Holocaust. In our most terrifying nightmares, none of us envisioned witnessing such a manifestation of absolute evil in our lifetime. On that fateful day, more than 1,100 people were brutally murdered in Israel – men, women, children, babies, the elderly – in a surprise attack that unfolded into an hours-long massacre. Hamas terrorists from Gaza stormed dozens of Israeli communities in the western Negev, taking some 240 hostages, including infants, the elderly, soldiers and foreign nationals. The shocking scale of the attack was matched only by the horrifying cruelty with which the victims were tortured, slaughtered, burned and mutilated.

In the aftermath, the global community witnessed a surge of support for Israel. However, this was met with an equally powerful and unforeseen wave of antisemitism. Violent anti-Israel, pro-Hamas demonstrations erupted on campuses and in cities worldwide, engulfing the Western world in a storm of hatred. As Jews mourned the tragedy in Israel, they were equally horrified and perplexed by the intensity of animosity from those who had been considered friends and allies.

The media, elite universities, and prestigious international bodies displayed a disturbing inability to distinguish between good and evil on a fundamental level. Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, and the historic homeland of the Jewish people was juxtaposed with Hamas, an extremist Islamist terror organization. Yet many failed to make this essential distinction.

The roots of this attack lay in Hamas's belief that Israeli society was deeply fractured. Observing Israel's five elections in three years, hostile protests, social unrest, and pervasive social media vitriol, they assumed an attack would deepen these divides and precipitate Israel's complete collapse.

They were gravely mistaken. When put to the test, the people of Israel swiftly reconnected with their core identity in a deep, fundamental way. Millions of Israelis, Jews worldwide, and non-Jewish friends rallied to Israel's side: donating money, taking action, doing battle, engaging in prayer and giving strength. Whether on the Gaza front, throughout Israel or within the global Jewish community, our enemies' efforts to defeat us only fortified us.

Confronting such unadulterated evil compelled many to question previously held beliefs and ask: "Who are we?" and "Why are we here?" From the depths of mourning and shock, questions about identity, heritage and mutual responsibility emerged, flooding the media and public discourse. The events of October 7 profoundly affected the world, and each of us personally. Many discovered newfound feelings of connection and meaning that they had never experienced before.

This booklet aims to explore the deep, searching questions these events have raised. Let us step back from the relentless news feeds, social media videos and push notifications to focus on the fundamentals: Why is there such hatred, and what is the underlying meaning of this evil and antisemitism? What is the Jews' mission in the world? Where do we go from here, and how do we move toward a better future?

Whenever I pondered these questions, I would ask myself, "What would Rabbi Sacks have said?"

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, was a renowned professor, philosopher and member of the House of Lords. He was a global leader who articulated his Jewish identity in a way that was unequivocal, fascinating and engaging. He passed away in 2020, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire and provide hope.

During the shiva for Sgt. Maj. Yossi Hershkovitz, a much-loved educator, high school principal in Jerusalem, and father of six, who fell in battle in Gaza, I learned that Yossi had asked himself the same question while fighting: "What would Rabbi Sacks have said?"

His widow, Hadas, discovered in his Google searches the words: "*Amalek* according to the teachings of Rabbi Sacks." Yossi understood that the war he was

fighting was essentially a battle against *Amalek*, the Biblical nation which is the embodiment of evil, and sought Rabbi Sacks' perspective.

As I left the shiva house and walked into the quiet Jerusalem street, I resolved to seek answers in Rabbi Sacks' teachings. Together with a team of writers and editors, I delved deeply into his works, lessons and interviews, uncovering insights that felt as though he had written them for our current moment.

The booklet you hold includes the most inspiring stories I have reported, from inside Israel and throughout the Jewish world, alongside selected writings from the works of Rabbi Sacks. You are invited to read about his journey from a confused university student to a leader of modern Jewry; to learn his philosophy on the battle against evil and on our mission as Jews; and to embrace his practical advice, which relates to each and every one of us. Read it cover to cover, or choose the passages that speak to you whenever you need strength and inspiration.

* * *

The greatest lesson I learned from Rabbi Sacks came during the coronavirus pandemic. My family and I were on a mission in the United States, which was thrilling and significant, until the world suddenly shut down. Within a few days we fled New York, returned to Israel and entered quarantine over Passover.

During those very confused, challenging days, Dan Sacker, from Rabbi Sacks' office in London, invited me to participate in a Passover Zoom meeting. I tried to explain that we were feeling very unsettled and living out of suitcases, but Rabbi Sacks insisted that it was crucial to find joy and help others rejoice. Tens of thousands of people from across the globe joined the Zoom, finding great inspiration. But what I never told him was that he had inspired me first.

This anecdote encapsulates Rabbi Sacks' approach to handling crises: find meaning, take on a mission, adhere to Jewish tradition, strive for happiness, and view events through a wide-angle lens, as part of our larger story.

* * *

I'd like to thank the team at Maggid Books for their cooperation in the production of this booklet – originally published in Hebrew – which will be distributed free of charge throughout Israel and worldwide. We're concurrently seeking partners

who are interested in publishing it in additional languages.

Many thanks to publisher Matthew Miller and his son, Yehoshua Miller, the CEO. Thank you to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Oriya Mevorach, Aryeh Grossman, Tsur Ehrlich, Rabbi Dr. Daniel Rose and Taly Hahn.

Thank you to the Eretz Hemdah community for their part in printing the original Hebrew booklet in 200,000 copies.

Many thanks to the Rabbi Sacks Legacy, especially Jonny Lipczer, Director of Communications, and Joanna Benarroch, Global CEO, and of course, the Sacks family.

Many thanks to Gidon Katz and Sharon Gelbach of IMP for their dedicated work in producing this English version of the booklet.

Our heartfelt thanks to Malki and Phil Rosen and Len Rosen on behalf of hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide. With a sense of urgency and responsibility, they took upon themselves the original Hebrew booklet and now this English version.

Many thanks to my wonderful team that has worked hard on this project: Bneyahu Yom Tov, Dr. Rakefet Ben Yishai, Hadassah Sassi, Rabbi Moshe Weiss, Shira Jacobowitz, Tal Rosenberg, Adina Auerbach and Tamar Meir. As always, a huge thank you to Yedidya and to our children, as well as to my parents, Aryeh and Ronit.

These words were written in Jerusalem, at the height of the war in Gaza.

May we merit to see the light defeat the darkness – in our hearts, on the battlefield, and throughout the entire world.

Sivan Rahav-Meir
August 2024 / Av 5784

Interested in learning more? Scan the QR code for additional Jewish content, to download this booklet, or to order more copies.

Personal Journeys to Judaism: Discovery in Times of Crisis

Tough times bring tough questions — and with them, the potential for profound, transformative answers. This was the experience of Rabbi Sacks as a young student in the 1960s, and it is now resonating with many Jewish people today. In a poignant parallel to the hidden, underground tunnels that Hamas terrorists dug to inflict death and destruction, we are witnessing the emergence of "spiritual tunnels" that are reconnecting the Jewish People with their identity.

The following stories I have reported align with Rabbi Sacks' own experience, merging into the larger narrative of a nation rediscovering itself.

'You Strengthen Us When You Attack Us'

At the beginning of the war, Ilan Muallem, a young American Jew working in the film industry, shared a video that went viral. Ilan's words are very personal, but they speak for many:

"Being Jewish was a completely secondary part of my life. I never thought about it, really. ...But then after October 7, seeing the way the world responded to the attack and the amount of Jew-hatred that actually exists kind of woke up my Jewish side, made me reconnect with it fully. And I think people don't realize just how many Jews out there have reconnected with their Jewish identities now.

"You know, we were disappearing, we were marrying non-Jews at exceptional numbers. Most of us don't follow the religion, I mean, look at me I'm all covered in tats — and now, so many of us are activated. You strengthen us when you attack us. We were disappearing. So I have to say, thank you to all of you who reminded us Jews what it actually means to be Jewish. Thank you for showing us the true face of antisemitism, and thank you for reuniting us. Because, I promise you, we are stronger now than ever before."

Never Too Late to Learn

He didn't allow me to take his picture, but he did let me photograph his booklet of Jewish studies for young children. I had just given a lecture at an event called "Go Jewish," for hundreds of young Jews from across Europe, and Edward, a thirty-year-old Jewish accountant from Amsterdam, approached me.

Since October 7, he'd decided to learn more about Judaism, and so, without shame, he studies from this children's booklet. He showed me where he was up to: the chapter on Passover. He was learning the most basic Hebrew words for the first time: *Pesach, matzah, maror,* so that he would be able to read from the Haggadah at the upcoming Seder.

I told him about one of the Jewish People's greatest sages, Rabbi Akiva, who began studying Torah at the age of 40. He, too, started by learning the Hebrew letters, first aleph, then bet, and so on.

Meeting Edward, who knew nothing about his heritage and his people before October 7, but who was, in the months leading up to Passover, preparing to experience for the first time the Jewish journey from slavery to freedom, made me wonder what other hidden things are happening in the world that we aren't aware of.

Collapse of a Dream

Prof. Liel Leibovitz, a professor at Columbia University, is one of the university's harshest critics. Among all those who are disillusioned and recalculating their course, his voice resonates loudly and clearly: "Twenty-five years ago, I flew to New York with a one-way ticket to Columbia University. Here, I told myself, at Columbia, I'd be able to fulfill my American dream. Then something terrible happened: my dream came true. Very quickly, I realized that I had the dubious honor of a front row seat to the complete collapse of higher education in the United States.

"This year, on the same lawn where I once stood on campus, the 'Solidarity with Gaza' camp was set up. The American flag was replaced with the Palestinian flag and Jewish students who passed by were heckled with shouts of'Go back to Poland.' One student gave a speech that was filmed and went viral, wishing on Israelis that every day would be October 7.

"Make no mistake: the young Hamas supporters on campus don't really care about Israel. If you ask them to explain their favorite slogan – 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' – it's doubtful whether they know that the river is the Jordan and the sea is the Mediterranean. Social networks are full of amusing videos of young people waving flags and slogans, then failing to answer the most basic questions about the conflict. These are the select students at the elite institutions of higher education, and the education they receive makes it clear to them that facts no longer matter.

"Where does that leave us, Israelis and American Jews? Surprisingly, in an excellent and highly optimistic place. I've heard Jews declare that the Golden Age of American Jewry is over. They are right, but only if we define "gold" as I foolishly did twenty-five years ago, on that day I first arrived at Columbia. Today I understand that we are not supposed to assimilate, but to shine. For every anxious, silent, and groveling American Jew, you will see another one awakening. There is a huge movement of Jews who seek not to be like everyone else, but to return to their roots and be themselves."

Stunned by the Silence

Maya Tevet-Dayan, an Israeli poet and lecturer, was invited to teach at the University of San Diego in California. Since October 7, she has shared her insights on her social media page:

"The silence of feminist organizations left me stunned. Horrific war crimes are being committed against Israeli women, yet all the feminist organizations remained completely silent. Not a word. Not a picture. Not a single speech. Not a single video on the networks. Just nothing. Since October 7, I feel like we've been orphaned, abandoned by the global left, universities, many countries, performers we loved to love – but for me, the feminist silence is the most painful. Maybe because it's heartbreaking to see that even the greatest global sisterhood is not greater than antisemitism. We were slaughtered, but global feminism is also dead.

"For years I avoided thinking about antisemitism, choosing to believe that any anger towards Israel stemmed from its policies in the territories. I'm here now, and I understand that everything I thought was nonsense. Yes, there are many

problems with Israel's policies, in my opinion. But if all the anger towards Israel is expressed in personal persecution of Jews and Israelis, then it's not anger at Israel, it's the persecution of Jews.

"In San Diego, half a world away from my home, I reached the understanding that it was never 'the government,' it was never 'the land,' it was never 'the occupation' – all these are complex issues in themselves, and I don't take them lightly, nor do I disregard criticism. But they are also a cover story and justification for the same ancient global disease: antisemitism. This understanding changed me.

"Since the massacre, I constantly notice other Jews. In the last week, I've received nearly 200 messages and letters from Jews all over the US, South Africa, Canada, who have been following my articles, and at night before bed, I sit in bed and try to respond to a few dozen each time. And although I answer different things to each one, there is one sentence that I send to everyone: 'There is a soul connection between us. I recognize you. We are not alone.' I wrote this to a Haredi rabbi, I wrote this to secular women, and they all responded: 'We recognize you too.' I feel it. I connect with them instantly. Our souls meet. I don't think it's just because we are a persecuted people. It feels much deeper than that."

Language of the Soul

Here's an unforgettable moment from a Shabbat event that brought together hundreds of Jews from across Europe: Singer Avi Miller, having just returned from an extended reserve duty in the Gaza Strip, was performing. As he sang, dozens of students gathered around him. Earlier, during my lecture, they had debated which was the most worrisome issue, antisemitism or assimilation. Now their focus had shifted from the problems to the solution. They danced in joyous circles, jumping and singing, '*Am Yisrael Chai*' '*Oseh Shalom*' and '*Anachnu Maaminim Bnei Maaminim*' with infectious energy.

Avi then took a line from the Shabbat song, '*Kah Echsof*,' and sang it slowly, over and over: '*V'yihiyu rachamecha mitgolelim al am kodshecha*' ('And may Your mercy be upon Your holy people'). I joined a circle of students from Amsterdam, and wherever I looked, I saw them wiping away tears. One student asked me what the words meant and I translated for her, as her friends listened on interestedly.

Suddenly it struck me: These students were connecting deeply to the stirring melody, moved to tears despite not understanding a single word. Their souls, however, understood perfectly.

As I mentioned earlier, tough times make us ask tough questions, but we seek meaningful answers. This was the experience of Rabbi Sacks. A promising young British university student, his life's trajectory was irrevocably altered by the Six Day War in 1967. Many of us are undergoing a similar process today. In the face of the upheaval that has shaken our worldview, we are finding ourselves grappling with questions about meaning and identity.

In response to the challenges of his time, Rabbi Sacks chose the path of leadership. For several decades he served as a dedicated representative of Judaism and Israel. His personal transformation had a profound and positive impact on millions of people the world over, both Jews and non-Jews alike.

This is his story.

Never Be Ashamed

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 yarmulke I was wearing. He said to my father, "Your son has forgotten to take off his yarmulke."

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.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 202)

Discovering my Identity

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.

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

(Ibid. p. 27)

Jewish Solidarity

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.

(Ibid. p. 29)

A Feeling of Belonging

Why had I felt such a powerful sense of identification? 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.

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." The rabbis of that time defined the moral obligation behind the metaphor. They said, *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*, "All Jews are responsible for one another." 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, in which 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 a hope. The search has taken up much of my life since then, because the question, once asked, does not go away.

(Ibid. p. 29)

Respecting Judaism

I had finished university and was teaching philosophy. At that time, some of my colleagues were Jewish, most not, but almost all were irreligious or anti-religious. 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 yarmulke 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.

Knowing where I was, he knew where he was. He was neither religious nor Jewish, but in some obscure way it helped him to know that there were people who were both, and if I gave up, something larger was giving way.

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.

(Ibid. p. 203)

My Meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe

It was in the summer of 1968, when I was an undergraduate student at Cambridge. I asked the Rebbe my questions, which were the questions of a young sophomore student, and the Rebbe gave me answers. He got through them quite rapidly, as if he really wanted to get to the point, at which my questions ended and his questions began.

Having patiently answered my questions, he unexpectedly performed a role reversal and started asking questions of his own. How many Jewish students were there at Cambridge University? How many of them were engaged with Jewish life? How many came to the synagogue? When he heard the answers – at the time, only about 10 percent of the Jewish students were in any way actively engaged with Jewish life – he asked me what I was personally doing about this.

This was not what I was expecting. I hadn't the slightest intention of taking on any leadership role.

I began a tortuous statement explaining why this had nothing to do with me: "In the situation in which I find myself…," I began. The Rebbe let the sentence go no further. "You do not *find* yourself in a situation," he said. "You *put* yourself in one. And if you put yourself in one situation you can put yourself in another." Quite soon it became clear what he was doing. He was challenging me to act. Something was evidently wrong with Jewish student life at Cambridge, and he was encouraging me to get involved, to do something to change the situation.

Suffice it to say that this encounter was the beginning of a long journey that led, in time, to a young man who had plans of becoming a lawyer, an economist, or an academic, becoming instead a rabbi, a teacher of rabbis, and eventually a chief rabbi. In retrospect, I said that people misjudged the Rebbe. They saw him as a man with thousands of followers. It was true, but it was the least interesting thing about him. What I learned from him was that a good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders. That is what the Rebbe did.

The Rebbe taught me something very important: the most transformative moments in your life happen when somebody else believes in you more than you believe in yourself.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership,* p. xxvi)

Write Your Own Chapter

Imagine that we are 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, and for a while we are immersed in the world, real or imaginary, of the writer. 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. None of them more than any other defines

who we are, and we can try any for as long as we like. As browsers, though, we remain intact, untouched. The various lifestyles into which we enter are like books we read. We are always free to change them, put them back on the shelf. They are what we read, not what we are.

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 of 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 traveled toward a certain destination and whose journey remains unfinished, dependent on me to take it further.

Other books may make no special claim on me; they may be interesting, inspiring, entrancing, but this one is different. Its very existence poses a set of questions addressed, not to the universe, but to me. Will I write my own chapter?

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 43)

Why I Am a Jew

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 did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come this far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one....

This is more than an imaginative exercise. There is such a book, and to be a Jew is to be a life, a chapter, in it. This book contains the knowledge of who I am and is perhaps the most important thing I can be given.

(Ibid. pp. 219, 47, 44)

What It Means to Be a Part of the Jewish People

What connects a young Israeli dancing at the Nova music festival to a Jew from Australia? What links a West Coast university student with an elderly grandmother from Sderot? There is a connection. Even if it's not immediately visible, it's stronger than ever.

One way to understand our current situation is through the adage: "The darker the night, the brighter the stars." In the Jewish world today, many stars are shining brightly. While it's impossible to capture and document all this light, the following stories represent some of the brilliance we are witnessing.

Rabbi Sacks often noted that the word "tragedy" doesn't exist in Hebrew, reflecting the Jewish resistance to a worldview that embraces despair. Instead, we believe in hope – tikvah, which is also the title of Israel's national anthem. Here are a few stories of hope emerging from the darkness.

Things Have Changed

Since October 7, I've observed a new response on social media. People are expressing sentiments such as, "I'm proud to be Israeli!" or "What wonderful people we have in our country!" These messages surged particularly after I shared the story of Yaffa Adar. The 85-year-old was kidnapped from her home in Kibbutz Nir Oz and taken to Gaza. The image of her, smiling on a golf cart surrounded by terrorists, was published worldwide. Many, including myself, wondered if she was fully aware of her circumstances; what was there for her to smile about? After fifty days in captivity, she was released and gave an interview explaining, "When I sat there, I told myself: 'I will not let them break me.' I wanted my children to look at me and be proud of me. I didn't cry or shed a tear. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. I wasn't afraid."

Many wrote to her with messages like, "Yaffa, I'm proud that we're from the

same nation," a sentiment echoed repeatedly in response to stories of heroism and sacrifice by our soldiers and their families as well as medical and educational personnel, and the thousands of volunteers from the military rabbinate, who took on the daunting task of identifying casualties with unprecedented creativity and resilience.

This spirit of unity and mutual responsibility extends to ordinary citizens, as well. When a Negev farmer asked for help harvesting vegetables because his foreign workers had left, Israelis of all political stripes came together to save his crop. "Everyone comes," he said, describing left-wing and right-wing activists working side by side. Similarly, when volunteers were needed to visit a family sitting shiva for their son, a lone soldier, hundreds from all sectors showed up within an hour.

Since October 7, Israeli flags are everywhere. It seems that companies are buying ad space just so that they can display the slogan "Together we will win!" Old, patriotic songs like "*Am Yisrael Chai*" and "*Acheinu Kol Beit Yisrael*" have surged in popularity.

Soldiers' weddings, which had been planned months in advance, were now organized overnight on IDF bases with volunteers providing food, decorations, music and cleanup. Then, came the wave of marriage proposals. New families are forming, thwarting Hamas's plans to destroy the bedrock of the Jewish nation. Newborns are being named Be'eri and Oz after affected communities and fallen soldiers.

Just days after the war broke out, the media reported that the most sought-after item among IDF soldiers was *tzitzit*, the fringed ritual garment, leading to a temporary shortfall. The Jewish Agency reported a 430% spike in immigration files opened in France, compared to the previous year.

While some media outlets and online influencers may have reverted to divisive rhetoric, millions of Israelis and Jews worldwide are embracing this renewed sense of Jewish nationhood and unity.

Heroism in Captivity

When the first Israeli captives began to return from the Hamas tunnels in Gaza, the horrors they endured were revealed — but so were moments of extraordinary

mutual support and spirit. As the days passed, more stories emerged of their resilience and superhuman efforts to maintain their dignity and identity.

Hagar Brodetz, who was kidnapped with her three children, "adopted" four-year-old Avigail Idan in captivity, after both of Avigail's parents were murdered. Young captives shared their meager food rations with the elderly. One released captive recounted how fellow hostage Alex Danzig, a veteran guide to Poland and historian, gave history lessons to the other young captives. "He had a captive audience…", his son responded with a smile when hearing this.

Captives Omer Shem Tov and Itai Regev were determined to make Kiddush on Friday night, in the heart of Gaza. "When the guard gave us a small bottle of grape juice, Omer and I looked at each other," said Itai. "God heard us, that we wanted to do Kiddush every Friday, and he sent us grape juice. We also had pretzels. We took the salt from the bottom of the bag for the 'Hamotzi'. Every Friday we took a small sip of the juice, hugged and said: 'With God's help, next Friday we will be home'."

Adina Moshe, 72, was kidnapped from Kibbutz Nir Oz. After weeks in captivity, her kidnappers told her that she would be released, but until the moment of her liberation, Adina did not stop arguing with the Hamas terrorist, demanding that they release another captive who was older and in worse physical condition than she was.

Three Hundred Thousand Plus One

Following the mass pro-Israel rally held in Washington last November, an American friend wrote to me the following: "The big story is not the historic rally that took place here yesterday, but the morning after. Three hundred thousand Jews are returning to their campuses, offices, and homes, but they're not the same Jews as they were yesterday: The kids who took a day off school and came to send a hug to Israel; the elderly people who flew in or who drove for hours from Miami and Canada (and those who were left behind because their antisemitic bus drivers refused to take them); and especially all our young people who returned to their colleges, forced to face terrible pro-Hamas demonstrations but who walked with heads held high, strength, and pride; we've changed.

"The media reported 300,000, but I want to talk about one: my cousin. He

doesn't keep in touch with us. He's never been to Israel, doesn't give his children any Jewish education, not even summer camp, and isn't connected to any Jewish community. Suddenly, I saw him at the rally in Washington. At first, I thought it was just someone who looked like him, but it was really him. For the first time in his life, my cousin chose to express his Jewish identity, driving ten hours from Boston to march for Israel.

"Something huge died in us on October 7, but something much greater was born."

Wedding Gift

A Jewish couple from abroad had planned to hold their wedding in Jerusalem, but due to the war, they ultimately decided to celebrate in their home community. The Hekelmans, who were to cater the event in Israel, understood that the order had been canceled. However, the couple surprised them with an unexpected decision: "We will proceed with the order, including all the different courses on the day of the wedding, but we will donate the meal to women from Israel's war-torn south."

On the night of the wedding, a special event for 550 women was held at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem. The women, many of them displaced from their homes in the south and many of them single mothers, were bussed into the capital for the lavish meal and a special program. Mazel tov to the couple, who wish to remain anonymous. You have built your home on the foundations of exceptional kindness.

Bread of Unity

Rabbi Yehuda Drizin, a Chabad emissary at Columbia University, thought he was going to a place of academic free expression, liberalism, and democracy. Instead he found himself in the heart of a violent, antisemitic battle, with huge pro-Hamas, anti-Israel demonstrations that only the NYPD was able to quell. He couldn't believe he would have to hire security guards to give participants at the Chabad Seder a sense of security, or that he'd have to escort them back to their dormitories. His messages from the campus were quoted worldwide:

"In the hours before the Seder, at the height of the demonstrations, I walked around the university distributing matzah to Jewish students and professors. The message was clear: When Jews see a rabbi walking proudly with a smile and with matzah, they understand they are not alone. We are together.

"More than a hundred students attended the Seders. I told them we would not surrender to the forces of evil. We will sing and we will not hide. 'In every generation, they rise against us to destroy us' – sometimes it's in Egypt, sometimes it's in Gaza, and sometimes it's also in prestigious faculties."

One Nation

It happened on a Saturday night in Antwerp, following a Shabbat with hundreds of Jews from all over Europe. For the first time, they were hearing about the situation in Israel directly from Israelis, rather than through European media. Among our delegation were fighters from the elite "Egoz" unit who had just come out of Gaza. I asked them what was most meaningful for them.

Netanel Almaliach said that after he had shared his experiences, a ten-year-old boy from the audience approached him and asked, "Where were you on the morning of Simchat Torah, when the terrorists infiltrated our security fence?" Netanel said: "I looked at this boy, born and raised in Belgium, and was struck by his words '*our* security fence,' reflecting a natural sense of connection and solidarity. It reinforces the understanding that we are one people, regardless of where we live."

In This Together

A student from NYU who participated in a solidarity mission to Israel last February, shared with me, "The last few months on campus were one long antisemitic nightmare. I felt I was suffocating. Here, I feel like I can breathe again. We came here to contribute and help, and each of us also collected funds to donate – but what we received was far greater. We found identity, connection, meaning. I'll never forget the Shabbat in Jerusalem; the visit to the rehab unit at Tel Hashomer hospital; the farmers in the south. This spirit is unparalleled. I am returning to campus a changed person."

In response, another student recounted that one of her university professors quietly confided, "I envy you for traveling to Israel. You are on the right side of history." She continued, "But he wasn't willing to say it out loud. The world is confused. My classmates, who consider themselves liberal and progressive, support Hamas openly, without shame. Our week here gave us moral clarity, a reminder that there is good and there is evil, and we must be on the side of good. I've gained a new understanding of the verse, "From Zion Torah will come forth, and the word of God from Jerusalem."

During that lecture, I understood that they didn't just come to support us; we are also supporting them. We're in this together.

The Power of a Jewish Mother

Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of Hersh, who was kidnapped to Gaza, was chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the one hundred most influential people in the world. I couldn't agree more. Her words have simple power, and I quote her in almost every lecture.

Rachel spoke at the UN, she met President Biden, and she addressed the 300,000-strong crowd at the pro-Israel rally in Washington. Every day, she wears a sticker with the number of days Hersh has been in captivity, and then goes to give another interview, to attend another event. When we met, she showed me a video she'd received that morning, of schoolgirls in Chicago giving charity for Hersh. "This," she said, "is what gives me the strength to get out of bed every morning," she said.

Rachel tells the world her personal story as well. As a young American Jew, far from Judaism, she chose to return to her heritage and to immigrate to Israel. She appeals to the world in the name of justice, light, Judaism, and morality, awakening hidden sparks of identity in her listeners.

She said that when she cries out, "Bring them home now!" she refers not only to the hostages in Gaza, but also to all the lost and distant children of our people, hoping that they will hear her, remember who they are, and return home.

The following is a sample of Rabbi Sacks' teachings on the Jewish People and their role in the world. It's uncanny how his words sound as if they were written especially for what we are experiencing today.

We Are One Family

It was the sense of family that kept Jews linked in a web of mutual obligation despite the fact that they were scattered across the world. Does it still exist? Sometimes the divisions in the Jewish world go so deep, and the insults hurled by one group against another are so brutal that one could almost be persuaded that it does not.

In the 1950s Martin Buber expressed the belief that the Jewish people in the traditional sense no longer existed. *Knesset Yisrael*, the covenantal people as a single entity before God, was no more. The divisions between Jews, religious and secular, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Zionist and non-Zionist, had, he thought, fragmented the people beyond hope of repair.

Yet that conclusion is premature for precisely the reason that makes family so elemental a bond. Argue with your friend and tomorrow he may no longer be your friend, but argue with your brother and tomorrow he is still your brother.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, p. 164)

A Living Miracle

Only in Israel can Jews today speak the Hebrew of the Bible as the language of everyday speech. Only there can they live Jewish time within a calendar structured according to the rhythms of the Jewish year. Only in Israel can Jews live Judaism in anything other than an edited edition. In Israel, and only there, Jews can walk where the prophets walked, climb the mountains Abraham climbed, lift their eyes to the hills that David saw, and continue the story their ancestors began.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 136)

Israel has had to face war and terror, but it has transformed the Jewish situation, by the mere fact of its existence, as the one place where Jews can defend themselves instead of relying on the all-too-often unreliable goodwill of others.

It is easy, surveying the news day by day, to believe that these are the worst of

times, but in some ways they are the best. Never before in four thousand years of history have Jews enjoyed, simultaneously, independence and sovereignty in Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. The very existence of Israel is as near to a miracle as we will find in the sober pages of empirical history.

(Ibid. p. 3)

Israel has done extraordinary things. It has absorbed immigrants from 103 countries, speaking 82 languages. It has turned Israel, a desolate landscape, into a place of forests and fields. It has developed cutting-edge agricultural and medical techniques and created one of the world's most advanced high-tech economies. It has produced great poets and novelists, artists and sculptors, symphony orchestras, universities and research institutes. It has presided over the rebirth of the great Talmudic academies destroyed in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. Wherever in the world there is a humanitarian disaster, Israel, if permitted, is one of the first to send aid. It has shared its technologies with other developing countries. Under immense strain, it has sustained democracy. ...

Had my great-grandfather... been able to see what it has achieved, he would hardly believe it. In truth, I hardly believe it when I read Jewish history and begin to understand what Jewish life was like when there was no Israel. For me, more than anything else, Israel is living testimony to the power of Moses' command, 'Choose life.'

(Ibid. p. 151)

'But It's Ours'

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 hot but bleak, set in the desert among brown and barren hills. There is not much to do there, so 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. This is our faith, our people, our heritage.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, pp. 206–207)

Know Where You Come From

Each of us, to feel we belong, needs to know something about our personal history – about who gave birth to us, where they came from, and the history of which they are a part. We see this most acutely in cases where, for whatever reason, this knowledge is missing.

A child who is adopted almost invariably develops a curiosity about who its natural parents were, a curiosity that in some cases can amount to an obsession. The same is true about children abandoned by a parent before they were able to develop a relationship. Not to know who I am can be unnerving and lead to a sense of incompleteness. The question of identity is fundamental and cannot be answered without knowing that a certain definite past is mine.

We are, each of us, many things – part of this country, that region, this neighborhood, that group. We have friendships, commitments, passions, and concerns that contribute to our personalities, but cannot substitute for the core of identity. I may be a lawyer, concerned about the environment; an American citizen living in Seattle who loves the films of Steven Spielberg. … But these are merely facts about me – what I do, what I care about, where I live, what I like – and they fall short of constituting who I am. They may change over time without my ceasing to be me.

The most fundamental answer to the question "Who am I?" – the one that never changes – involves a journey back through time into who my parents were, and theirs, and so on as far back as I can go. That is the story into which I was born. I may choose not to continue it, but I cannot deny it without in some way living a lie. The history of my family is where my identity begins.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 44)

We Are All Ambassadors

Rabbi Norman Lamm, the former president of Yeshiva University, tells the amusing story of Mendel the waiter. When the news came through to a cruise liner about the daring Israeli raid on Entebbe in 1976, the passengers wanted to pay tribute, in some way, to Israel and the Jewish people. A search was undertaken to see if there were any Jewish members on board the ship. Only one Jew could be found: Mendel the waiter. So, at a solemn ceremony, the captain of the cruise liner, on behalf of all the passengers, offered his deep congratulations to Mendel, who suddenly found himself elected *de facto* as the ambassador of the Jewish people.

We are all, like it or not, ambassadors of the Jewish people, and how we live, behave and treat others reflects not only on us as individuals but on Jewry as a whole, and thus on Judaism and the God of Israel.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*, p. 166)

What Is *Your* Story?

Louis S. was not a Holocaust survivor. His family had left Poland long before, after a succession of pogroms and a wave of antisemitic incidents. He came to Britain when he was six. The family were poor. Louis had to leave school at the age of fourteen and work to help support his parents and siblings. Eventually he was able to open a shop selling remnants of cloth, schmatters as they were known, to local tailors. It was not a successful business. Days would pass without a customer. Louis would listen to the radio and read. Eventually he, too, married and had children. Louis went to synagogue every day. He did not understand much Hebrew, but this he knew: he was a Jew, he believed in God, and his fate was in God's hands. That was enough for him. Louis walked tall.

Towards the end of his life, in his eighties, he had to undergo five major operations. Each sapped his strength and he grew progressively weaker. In the hospital he had with him his tallit and tefillin – his prayer shawl and phylacteries – and he would put them on as best he could, and pray. At other times he would read from a little Hebrew copy of the book of Psalms. God was watching over him, and Louis trusted him. He knew his days on earth were nearing their end and God was about to take him to himself. He died peacefully, one of his sons holding

his hand. He told me later that he had been saying the morning prayers and had just reached the passage, 'The soul you gave me is pure . . .' when Louis died.

Louis was my father.

Louis remained ordinary and yet his life had a dignity and thankfulness to which I, his son, could barely aspire. He believed in God and lived his life in his presence. That fact gave his life meaning.

He was here through God's love, lived on God's earth, breathed God's breath, what he had he owed to God, and therefore whatever he could he shared with others. He came to God's house, the synagogue, and thanked him for his life, his family and the freedom to thank him. His life had a kind of radiance and gravitas, a belongingness. He saw no need to philosophize beyond that point. When asked, 'How are you?' he would reply, as Jews of his kind always did, *Barukh Hashem*, 'Thank God.' He did good to others unostentatiously, because that is what you do, that is why we are here.

(Rabbi Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 193)

On Jewish Pride

The late Shlomo Carlebach, rabbi and folk singer who spent a lifetime talking to students on campus, once said: "We get to talking about religion and I ask people what they are. If someone says, 'I'm a Catholic,' I know he's a Catholic. If someone says, 'I'm a Protestant,' I know she's a Protestant. If someone says, 'I'm just a human being,' I know that's a Jew."

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll,* p. 185)

Smallest Among the Nations

Moses told the Jews that they were 'among the smallest of all the nations.' They still are. The American writer Milton Himmelfarb once remarked that the entire population of world Jewry is smaller than the statistical error in the Chinese census.

Moses said, "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples (Deut. 7:7). How then was their strength to be measured? The Biblical answer

is surpassingly beautiful: Ask people to give, then count their contributions. A people can be numerically small, yet its contributions may be vast.

(*The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*, p. 50)

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. In one era it was the Hebrew Bible, the most influential document in the history of the world. In later centuries Jews produced a never-ending stream of scholars, saints, poets and philosophers. In more recent times, as the doors of Western society opened, they made their mark in one field after another: business, industry, the arts and sciences, cinema, the media, medicine and almost every field of academic life...

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.... The Jewish question is not, What can the world give me? It is, What can I give to the world? The Jewish story is a story of responsibility.

(Rabbi Sacks, *From Renewal to Responsibility*)

The Torah Unites Us

Jews were dispersed throughout the world, they were not part of the same political jurisdiction, but they continued to see themselves as a single nation, a distinctive and persistent group, often more closely linked to other Jews throughout the world than to the peoples among whom they lived.

They did not share the same culture. While Rashi and the Tosafists were living in Christian France, Maimonides inhabited an Islamic culture, first in Spain, then in Egypt. Nor were their fates the same at any given time. While North European Jewry was suffering massacres during the First Crusade, Spanish Jewry was enjoying its golden age. While the Jews of Spain were experiencing the trauma of expulsion, the Jews of Poland were thriving in a rare moment of tolerance.

They did not use the same language of everyday speech. Ashkenazi Jews spoke Yiddish, Spanish and Portuguese Jews spoke Ladino, and there were as many as twenty-five other vernaculars, among them Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Slavic, Judeo-

Yazdi, JudeoShirazi, Judeo-Esfahani and Judeo-Marathi, as well as Yevanic, a form of Judeo-Greek. … Nothing united them at all – nothing, that is, that would normally constitute nationhood.

What united them? Rav Saadia Gaon in the tenth century gave the answer: 'Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its religious laws.' Wherever Jews were, they kept the same commandments, studied the same sacred texts, observed the same Sabbaths and fast days, and said essentially the same prayers in the same holy language.

They even faced the same spot while doing so: Jerusalem where the Temple once stood and where the Divine presence was still held to have its earthly habitation. These invisible strands of connection sustained them in a bond of collective belonging that had no parallel among any other national grouping. Some feared this, others respected it, but no one doubted that Jews were different. Haman said so in the book of Esther: 'There is one people, scattered and divided among the peoples, whose laws are different from all others' (Esth. 3:8). …

That is the paradox. In their own land, the place where every other nation is to some degree united, Jews were split beyond repair. In dispersion, where every other nation has assimilated and disappeared, they remained distinctive and, in essentials at least, united.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 34)

Jewish Continuity

There are [problems] from within. There is the crisis of Jewish continuity. Throughout the Diaspora on average one in two young Jews is, through outmarriage, assimilation or disaffiliation, choosing not to continue the Jewish story; to be the last leaf on a tree that has lasted for four thousand years.

One episode, told by a rabbinical colleague, has long lingered in my mind. It took place in Russia in the early 1990s, following the collapse of communism. For the first time in seventy years, Jews were free to live openly as Jews, but at the same time antisemitic attitudes, long suppressed, also came to the surface.

A British rabbi had gone there to help with the reconstruction of Jewish life, and was one day visited by a young lady in distress. "All my life," she said, "I hid the fact that I was a Jew and no one ever commented on my Jewishness. Now,

though, when I walk past, my neighbors mutter *Zhid* [Jew]. What shall I do?" The rabbi replied, "If you had not told me you were Jewish, I would never have known. But with my hat and beard, no one could miss the fact that I am a Jew. Yet, in all the months I have been here, no one has shouted *Zhid* at me. Why do you think that is?" The girl was silent for a moment and then said, "Because they know that if they shout *Zhid* at me, I will take it as an insult, but if they shout *Zhid* at you, you will take it as a compliment."

That is a deep insight. Beyond eternal vigilance, the best way for Jews to combat antisemitism is to wear their identity with pride.

(Ibid. p. 1, 108)

The Value of Challenge

"To guarantee continuity, Judaism must be made as easy and undemanding as possible." Such has been the thought of the liberal movements in Judaism for the past two hundred years. ... [T]his sounds eminently reasonable. The only problem is that it is untrue and misconceived.

Consider the three pilgrimage festivals, Passover (Pesach), Pentecost (Shavuot) and Tabernacles (Sukkot). Which is most widely observed? The answer given by all audiences I have asked has been: first Passover, then Tabernacles, then Pentecost. Then consider which is the most demanding. First is Passover, which involves lengthy, even exhausting, preparations. The second most strenuous is Tabernacles. This involves constructing a sukkah, a hut or shed with leaves for a roof, in which one eats for the seven (or, outside Israel, eight) days of the festival. It also involves purchasing the 'four kinds' – a palm branch (lulav), a citron (etrog), and willow and myrtle leaves used in the festival services. The least demanding is Pentecost, which has few special demands other than an all-night study session (tikkun), itself a post-Talmudic custom.

The more demanding the festival, the more it is observed.

This is manifestly the case when it comes to the most exacting day of all, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in which Jews spend an entire day in the synagogue, fasting, praying and repenting. On the thesis that the easier a ritual, the more widely it is observed, one would expect the synagogue to be empty on this day. In fact, it is more crowded than on any other day of the year.

It is normally assumed that Jews made sacrifices for their faith because they valued it. The opposite may also be true: Jews valued their faith because they made sacrifices for it. Judaism, with its 613 commands and its vast literature that requires years of study to master, is about doing hard things. That was why, throughout the ages, Jews valued it and sought to hand it on to their children. They knew there were easier options, and they declined them.

(Ibid. p. 65)

Tragedy vs Hope

A profound difference separates Judaism from the other great civilization of the West, ancient Greece. The Greeks believed in … the concept of tragedy. Tragedy means something more than misfortune, catastrophe or disaster. All human groups know disasters, but tragedy is a cultural artefact. It comes from a view of the world in which we believe we control fate, but in fact fate controls us. There is a force, or set of forces, operative in human destiny as in all else, that brings suffering regardless of what we do.

Jews gave the world a different view, no less coherent and profound, but deeply incompatible with a tragic view of life. It gave it the idea of hope. In a world of hope, we are not alone. We exist because someone, the One, created us in love. He knows we are here, hears our prayers, forgives our failures, lights our way through the wilderness of time, teaches us the paths of righteousness, speaks to us in the silence of the soul and takes our hand in the presence of fear, giving us the strength to resist despair. Hope is not mere longing, expectation, dream or desire, any more than tragedy is mere disaster. It is a culturally specific phenomenon, just as tragedy is, and the two cannot co-exist.

With this we come finally to a definition of Judaism that explains not only what it has meant to Jews, but what it has meant to the world. Judaism is the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind. The prophets, even the most pessimistic, were all agents of hope. …

God is the redemption of our solitude. Those who live in the presence of God are not immune to suffering, but they are able to say, "Though I walk through the

valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me." Judaism is the principled defeat of tragedy in the name of hope.

(Ibid. p. 244)

Agents of Hope

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is belief in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God's call, obey his will, and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope.

Somehow, in a way I find mysterious and moving, the Jewish people wrote a story of hope that has the power to inspire all who dare to believe that injustice and brutality are not the final word about the human condition, that faith can be more powerful than empires, that love given is not given in vain, that ideals are not illusions to give us comfort, but candles to light our way along a winding road in the dark night without giving way to fear or losing a sense of direction.

(Ibid. p. 250)

When I stand today in Jerusalem, or in a Jewish school, or see a Jewish couple under the wedding canopy, or see parents at the Shabbat table blessing their children, there are times when I am overcome with tears, not in sadness nor in joy, but in awe at this people who came face-to-face with the angel of death and refused to give it a final victory. The Jewish people live, and still bear witness to the living God.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 184)

We *Can* Avert the Evil Decree

The Jewish festivals are all stories of hope. Passover tells us that a people enslaved, powerless and without rights can win their freedom. Pentecost tells us that a people unloved by their contemporaries can become the covenantal partner of God himself. Tabernacles tells us that even a homeless nation, living

in temporary dwellings, is still on a journey to the Promised Land.

The New Year and Day of Atonement are festivals of a different kind of hope. The three pilgrimage festivals are about a nation and its history. The Days of Awe are about the individual and his or her destiny. They tell us that we are not prisoners of our past. We are not condemned forever to be haunted by the wrong we once did. We can repent and be forgiven; we can begin again.

On the High Holy Days Jews say to the contrary, "Penitence, prayer and charity avert the evil decree." In Judaism there is no such thing as a decree that cannot be averted. Therefore, there is no future that is bereft of hope.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 247)

Refusing to Despair

The story is told that Napoleon was once passing a synagogue on the somber day of Tisha B'Av, when he was struck by sounds of crying and wailing emanating from inside the building. "What are the Jews mourning?" he asked one of his officers. "They are grieving for Jerusalem," came back the reply. "And how long ago did the Jews lose Jerusalem?" asked Napoleon. "More than 1,700 years ago," the soldier answered. Napoleon was quiet for a moment and then said softly, "A people that remembers a place for so long will one day have it restored to them."

Jews are the people who refused to be comforted because they never gave up hope. Jacob did eventually see Joseph again. Rachel's children did return to the land. Jerusalem is once again the Jewish home. All the evidence may suggest otherwise: it may seem to signify irretrievable loss, a decree of history that cannot be overturned, a fate that must be accepted. Jews never believed the evidence because they had something else to set against it – a faith, a trust, an unbreakable hope that proved stronger than historical inevitability.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, pp. 256–257)

Still Young

Had world Jewry sat passively and wept from then till now for the murdered generations of European Jewry, it would have been an understandable reaction. But it did not. It was as if the Jewish people had said collectively, in the words

of King David, "I will not die but live" (Ps. 118:17), thereby giving testimony to the God of life. That is why the West's oldest nation is still young, a world leader in life-saving medicine, disaster relief, and life-enhancing technology. This is a transformative idea. To survive tragedy and trauma, first build the future. Only then, remember the past.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 24).

Growth That Arises From Crisis

Every tragedy in Jewish history was followed by a new wave of creativity. The destruction of the First Temple led to the renewal of the Torah in the life of the nation, exemplified by the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. The destruction of the Second Temple led to the great works of the oral tradition, Midrash, Mishnah and the two Talmuds. The massacres of Jewish communities in northern Europe during the First Crusade led to the emergence of Hassidei Ashkenaz, the German-Jewish pietists.

The medieval encounter with Christianity led to a renewal of Bible commentary. The meeting with Islam inspired a renaissance of Jewish philosophy. The Spanish Expulsion was followed by the mystical revival in Safed in the sixteenth century. The greatest catastrophe of all led to the greatest rebirth: a mere three years after standing eyeball to eyeball with the angel of death at Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Treblinka, the Jewish people responded by their greatest collective affirmation of life in two thousand years, with the proclamation of the state of Israel. … Jews [do not] give way to defeat or despair. They are the people of hope.

The Chinese ideogram for "crisis" also means "opportunity." Perhaps that is why Chinese civilization has survived for so long. Hebrew, however, is more hopeful still. The word for crisis, mashber, also means a 'childbirth chair'. The Jewish reflex is to see difficult times as birth pangs. Something new is being born.

(Rabbi Sacks, Future Tense, p. 54, 55)

We cannot change the past, but by remembering the past we can change the future. And though we cannot bring the dead back to life, we can help ensure that they did not die in vain.

(Ibid. p. 88)

Decide Where You Are Going

Smartphones can do amazing things – few more amazing than Waze, the Israeli-designed satellite navigation system acquired by Google in 2013. But there is one thing even Waze cannot do. It can tell you how to get there, but it cannot tell you where to go. That is something you must decide.

The most important decision we can make in life is to choose where we want eventually to be. Without a sense of destiny and destination, our lives will be directionless. If we don't know where we want to go, we will never get there no matter how fast we travel. Yet despite this, there are people who spend months planning a holiday, but not even a day planning a life. They simply let it happen...

So it is in the life of nations and individuals... In the case of Judaism that purpose is clear: to show what it is to create a small clearing in the desert of humanity where freedom and order coexist, where justice prevails, the weak are cared for and those in need are given help, where we have the humility to attribute our successes to God and our failures to ourselves, where we cherish life as the gift of God and do all we can to make it holy...

To achieve this, though, we have to have a sense of collective purpose. That is the choice that Moses, speaking in the name of God, set before the Israelites. *Mikra* or *mikreh*? Does life just happen? Or is it a call from God to create moments of moral and spiritual beauty that redeem our humanity from the ruthless pursuit of power? "To give human life the dignity of a purpose."

That is what Jews are called on to show the world.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, pp. 167–171)

Why so? Because Judaism is a faith for those who seek to change the world. That is unusual in the history of faith. Most religions are about accepting the world the way it is. *Judaism is a protest against the world that is in the name of the world that ought to be*. To be a Jew is to seek to make a difference, to change lives for the better, to heal some of the scars of our fractured world.

(Ibid. p. 189)

Vision, Not Headlines

Tomorrow's headlines are not the verdict of history. Jews have been around

for two-thirds of the history of civilization. That is long enough to know that Jewish life needs something more prophetic than crisis management. … to set the present in the wider context of past and future, and immediate problems in terms of ultimate ideals.

In the past Jews lived through catastrophes that would have spelled the end of most nations: the destruction of Solomon's temple, the Babylonian exile, the Roman conquest, the Hadrianic persecutions, the massacres of the Crusades, the Spanish expulsion. They wrote elegies; they mourned; they prayed. But they did not give way to fear. They did not define themselves as victims. They did not see antisemitism written into the fabric of the universe. They knew they existed for a purpose, and it was not for themselves alone.

Jews, whether in Israel or elsewhere, need to recover a sense of purpose. Until you know where you want to be, you will not know where to go.

There is a line in the Bible more often quoted by non-Jews than Jews: 'Without a vision, the people perish' (Prov. 29:18). Yet it is Jews who should be listening to that verse. They were a people of vision whose heroes were visionaries. That much must never be lost.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 4)

Continue to Dream

Dreaming is often thought to be impractical. Not so; it is one of the most practical things we can do. … it is our dreams that give us direction. Theodor Herzl, to whom more than any other person we owe the existence of the State of Israel, used to say, "If you will it, it is no dream."

I once heard a wonderful story from Elie Wiesel. There was a time when Sigmund Freud and Theodor Herzl lived in the same district of Vienna. "Fortunately," Wiesel said, "they never met. Can you imagine what would have happened had they met? Theodor Herzl would have said: 'I have a dream of a Jewish state.' Freud would have replied: 'Tell me, Herr Herzl, how long have you been having this dream? Lie down on my couch, and I will psychoanalyze you.' Herzl would have been cured of his dreams and today there would be no Jewish state." Fortunately, the Jewish people have never been cured of their dreams.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*, p. 49)

Terror, Antisemitism, Evil: How Do We Counter Them?

This is not the first time that absolute evil has chosen the Jewish People as its enemy. It's not the first time that darkness has tried to snuff out the light, targeting specifically all who carry the name "Jew" as those who must be destroyed completely and indiscriminately – men and women, children and the elderly.

Almost all our holidays tell the story of a wicked enemy who thought he could destroy us but was ultimately defeated: Pharaoh didn't succeed on Passover; Ahasuerus and Haman failed in their plot on Purim; on Chanukah, we overcame all of Antiochus's decrees; and in our generation, of course, there are still survivors who witnessed Hitler's attempt to implement the Final Solution. One third of the Jewish People was destroyed – 6 million, including 1.5 million children, but our response is clear: Am Yisrael Chai, the Jewish People lives!

This is our response now, as well. What is our secret? How did our enemies always disappear, while we survived, and even thrived, against all odds? The following are stories of faith, of a decision to rise and overcome evil, in our current battle against it.

A Great People

On one of the more painful days of the war, when more and more names of fallen soldiers were being released, Yael Binenfeld from the city of Lod sent me an empowering message: "A few hours ago," she wrote, "a siren sounded while the children were at school. One of my children called me crying, saying he was scared and asking me to come and pick him up. I tried every tool in the book: empathy, mirroring, framing the event, practicing breathing... but nothing helped. Then, in a last-ditch effort, I said to him: 'You are part of the people of Israel, and the people of Israel are full of heroism, so you are also full of heroism.

What existed in the people of Israel throughout the generations exists in you too. And I finished with a quote: 'Behold, the people rise up as a lion, and as a young lion, it lifts itself' (Numbers 23:24). Suddenly, out of nowhere, he just said to me: 'Okay, Mom, I'm going back to class,' and hung up.

"This story is not just about a little boy, but all of us. Our nation thirsts for greatness. It draws strength and resilience from its deep roots. The great qualities that existed in our nation's forebears were passed down from them to us, generation after generation. This strength is in all our DNA. Even if there are delays, even if the road is long, the people of Israel live. This is what comforts us; this is what gives us strength."

Yael's son understood that he is part of a great people, a great story. And he's right!

'They Want Us to Be Happy'

I sat on the stage in Jerusalem and presented my guest in the most technical terms, but each word intensified the sadness and the pain: Orit Mark-Ettinger lost her father, Rabbi Michi, who was murdered in a terror attack when she was sixteen. A few years later, her brother Shlomi, a Mossad agent, was killed in a car accident on his way to a mission. On Simchat Torah, her uncle, Elchanan Kalmanzon, together with two other family members, saved over one hundred people in Kibbutz Be'eri, until he was murdered. And then her brother, Pedaya Mark fell in combat in Gaza. Orit lost four family members, each of whom was extremely close to her. Today at twenty-four, she's married with a baby. When she opened the evening with the following message it was especially empowering: "I know that you're all wondering how I am smiling. It's true, I could cry all day – and I do cry a lot, it's important, but I constantly tell myself: If I lost four very precious people and I'm still alive, I must live my life with meaning. If I woke up this morning, there must be a good reason for it. Those who fell are now in a good place. We are the ones who need to cope. And they, from their place on high, want us to be happy and to do good."

We Choose the Side of Good

It's late at night in the Beit Shemesh cemetery. Master Sgt. (res.) Elisha Loewenstern, who fell in battle in Gaza, was laid to rest. His wife Hadas, with whom he had six children, entered the cemetery and gazed at the huge crowd that had gathered to pay their final respects. "Lift your heads up high," she said. "Elisha died a hero, defending the people. Be proud." During her eulogy, one line echoed in the ears of the thousands who were there, and became widely quoted afterward: "We are heartbroken, but that's because we have a heart."

The young widow expressed in simple words a deep philosophical truth: Evil doesn't ask why there is evil in the world. Only we are so troubled and hurt by it, because we are good. Hadas continued, "All the enemies of Israel will never be able to defeat the people of Israel! And that is because we are good and they are evil. Good always wins. They murder us because we cried out to the world, "Thou shalt not murder." And if I must choose a side, I will choose the side of good."

A True Interpretation of Reality

Fourteen-year-old Matanya Tzur Aryeh hails from the village of Kfar Maimon in southern Israel, near Kibbutz Be'eri. After tense days in the bomb shelter, while terrorists were still roaming outside, the residents of Kfar Maimon were evacuated to hotels in Jerusalem.

I met them at the temporary school opened in the capital for hundreds of children from the Gaza border area. In answer to my question: "What gives you strength these days?" I received varied answers. Many said music; some mentioned their friends, their parents, family, faith, the Torah, the IDF, the unity of the people. Then a blond-haired boy raised his hand and said: "The dustbin of history. I look at our long history and at who was thrown into the 'dustbin' over the generations. If we look inside we'll find Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Amalek, Antiochus, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Haman, Ahasuerus, Pharaoh... all the wicked ones are there. Today they are irrelevant. The world is moving forward. There is a plan here; evil is not here to stay, it is temporary. The people of Israel are small but eternal and strong. Sinwar and Nasrallah's place is there too, in the dustbin. Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran will all end up there, soon."

I knew all this intellectually, but at that moment I was able to feel it in my

heart. With his gentle smile, Matanya succeeded in interpreting reality better than all the pundits.

Post-Traumatic Growth

We're so used to hearing about PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, but I was happy to learn that there is also PTG – post-traumatic *growth*. Under certain circumstances, apparently, we are capable of achieving things we wouldn't have been able to achieve without the stress and trauma! This is beyond resilience. It involves far more than just returning to routine and functioning normally; It's about genuine growth and positive change.

I saw it in action when I met Brian Mast. The American Congressman lost both legs in the Afghanistan war and is considered an American hero and a passionate supporter of Israel. He stated that he wasn't sure if he would have achieved all his accomplishments without the injury.

I saw it in Kibbutz Kerem Shalom, near the Gaza border. Every time a missile or shrapnel falls in the kibbutz and creates a hole in the ground, they gather for a festive ceremony and plant a tree there. "If the enemy has already created a hole, we won't leave it open or just fill it. Rather, we plant a tree there. Where they sought to cause death, we bring life and growth."

It's true on a national level, too. Throughout history, every attempt to destroy the Jewish people has not only failed but it caused us to grow stronger.

Fighting Propaganda with Truth

Before I began my lecture, the organizer of the New Jersey delegation asked me, "Please tell us the real story about what's happening now in Israel." Without hesitating I exclaimed, "*You* are the story! Who flies twelve hours to a country at war, unless they feel that it's their home, their family?"

After conversing with many wonderful members of support delegations who visited Israel, I have gathered the best advocacy rules I learned from them:

- The Palestinians succeed in world public opinion because they elicit more pity, not because they are right. In our era emotions wield more

power than facts, and that's the reason we were able to garner world support in the aftermath of October 7, but as soon as we started winning and the pendulum of pity and poverty swung to the other side, world public opinion shifted. When it comes to advocacy, Israel cannot win the competition of who is the most pitiful; it must explain that it is fighting against evil, on behalf of justice, light, truth, and morality.

- Fighting antisemitism is important, but it is not the ultimate goal. "We fight antisemitism so that we can focus on our main goal – to illuminate the world, to fill it with truth and goodness as God commanded us, to elevate the world," said Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, President of Yeshiva University. "We must not be identified only with hatred and negative forces. We have a positive message."
- Rabbi Efrem Goldberg of the Boca Raton Synagogue in Florida brought many delegations of donors who helped generously. "I'm not worried about Israel's future," he told me on one of those visits. "It's small and struggling with challenges, but it is not *confused*. It knows what it is fighting for. I am, though, very worried about the future of the United States and Europe. Where there is moral decay, where people are unable to differentiate between light and darkness, it makes no difference how much money or military power they have. Even the greatest superpower will not survive without the right spirit."

In dozens of stories and speeches, Rabbi Sacks presents his deep philosophical ideas about coping with evil, and about the victory of the Jewish People over its enemies. The following samples provide some food for thought.

Remember, There Is Evil in the World

After 9/11, when the horror and trauma had subsided, Americans found themselves asking what had happened and why. Was it a disaster? A tragedy? A crime? An act of war? It did not seem to fit the pre-existing paradigms. And why had it happened? The question most often asked about Al Qaeda was, "Why do they hate us?"

In the wake of those events, American thinker Lee Harris said that we in the

West had forgotten the concept of an enemy. … We believe that for every problem there is a solution, for every conflict a resolution. The way to achieve it is to sit down, negotiate, and do on balance what is best for all.

In such a world there are no enemies, merely conflicts of interest. An enemy, says Harris, is simply "a friend we haven't done enough for yet." In the real world, however, not everyone is a liberal democrat. An enemy is "someone who is willing to die in order to kill you."

This explains the significance of the unusual command in the Torah: "Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God … You shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" (Deut. 25:17–19).

It is easy at times of peace to forget the evil that lies just beneath the surface of the human heart. Never was this truer than in the past three centuries. The birth of Enlightenment, toleration, emancipation, liberalism and human rights persuaded many, Jews among them, that collective evil was as extinct as the Amalekites. Evil was then, not now. That age eventually begat nationalism, fascism, communism, two World Wars, some of the brutal tyrannies ever known, and the worst crime of man against man.

Today, the great danger is terror.

Evil never dies. We are commanded to remember, not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future, and not for revenge but the opposite: a world free of revenge and other forms of violence.

That is why we are commanded to remember and never forget Amalek, not because the historic people still exists, but because a society of rational actors can sometimes believe that the world is full of rational actors with whom one can negotiate peace. It is not always so.

Rarely was a biblical message so relevant to the future of the West and of freedom itself. Freedom depends on our ability to remember and, whenever necessary, confront the face of Amalek throughout history. Sometimes there may be no alternative but to fight evil and defeat it.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Essays on Ethics*, pp. 97–102

Our Refusal to Accept Evil

How can a benevolent God sanction the corruption and destruction of his Creation?

There is suffering and injustice. There is sickness and premature death. There are natural disasters. That is the world we inhabit and for the time being there is no other. Within this world, we seek meaning, not explanation.

Suffering tears our world apart. Suffering threatens to render life meaningless. How can I live with this pain? How can I want to continue to live in such a world? Something in our life that once rooted us is taken from us. Where there was once wholeness there is now a gaping hole. There can be a darkness so dark that it extinguishes any attempt to light a light. The Bible does not hide from this. It is an honest book.

God is not the solution to a contradiction, but the call to a journey that will eventually change the world by showing that there is another way to live, that there is hope.

Belief in God is an assertion of human dignity in the face of humiliation, and of hope in the midst of the dark night of despair. It is a refusal to accept evil as inevitable, but at the same time an acknowledgement that we cannot leave redemption entirely to God.

Perhaps this is not the world we would have chosen, but it is the only one we have. Either we resign ourselves to the evil it contains, or we register a protest against it.

(Rabbi Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, pp. 249–261.)

Within the Difficulty

Life is not easy. Judaism does not see the world through rose-tinted lenses. The sufferings of our ancestors haunt our prayers. The world we live in is not the world as it ought to be. That is why, despite every temptation, Judaism has never been able to say the Messianic Age has come, even though we await it daily.

When Jews went into exile, the Shekhina, the Divine Presence, went with them. God is always there, "close to all who call on Him in truth" (Ps. 145:18). He may hide His face, but He is there. He may be silent, but He is listening to us,

hearing us and healing us in ways we may not understand at the time but which become clear in retrospect.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration*, p. 22)

Internal Liberation

In the Kovno ghetto in the early 1940s, an extraordinary scene took place in the makeshift synagogue. The worshippers already knew the fate in store for them. One morning the leader of prayers stopped in the middle of the service and said, "How can I thank God for my freedom when I am a prisoner facing death? Only a madman could say this prayer now." The rabbi replied softly, "Heaven forbid that we should not say the blessing. Our enemies wish to make us slaves. But though they control our bodies, they do not own our souls. By making this blessing we show that even here we refuse to be defeated. We are free men, temporarily in captivity. That is how we shall live.

The hardest question for faith today is: Where was God in Auschwitz? Where was God when His faithful servants were being turned to ashes and dying as martyrs in their millions? Where was redemption when the Jews of Europe were gassed and burned and God was silent? If God redeems – not in heaven but here on earth – where is His redemption?

The greatest prophets asked this question and received no answer. Nonetheless, there is a fragment of an answer, and it was given by the rabbi in the Kovno ghetto. God has chosen only one dwelling place in this finite, physical universe and that is the human heart.

(*The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*, p. 31.)

Where was God in the Kovno ghetto? In the hearts of those who, though they were prisoners in the valley of the shadow of death, insisted on pronouncing a blessing as free human beings. Their story has no simple, happy ending, but they left us an immortal legacy: the knowledge that the human spirit cannot be killed, and that therefore freedom will always win the final battle.

(Ibid. p.30)

Where Is Man?

When I first stood at Auschwitz-Birkenau the question that haunted me was not, "Where was God?". God was in the command, "You shall not murder." God was in the words, "You shall not oppress the stranger." God was saying to humanity, "Your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground." God did not stop the first humans eating forbidden fruit. He did not stop Cain committing murder. He did not stop the Egyptians enslaving the Israelites. God does not save us from ourselves. That, according to the Talmud, is why creating man was such a risk that the angels advised against it. The question that haunts me after the Holocaust, as it does today in this new age of chaos, is "Where is man?"

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas,* p. 7)

Even When You Don't Believe in Yourself

The real religious mystery, according to Judaism, is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us.

This is the extraordinary idea that shines through the entire Tanakh. God invests His hopes for the universe in this strange, refractory, cantankerous, ungrateful, and sometimes degenerate creature called Homo sapiens, part dust of the earth, part breath of God, whose behavior disappoints and sometimes appalls Him. Yet He never gives up.

(Ibid. p. 5)

God Is Interested in Man

A mere thirty-four verses in the Bible are dedicated to God's creation of the universe, while some six hundred are dedicated to the Israelites' construction of the tabernacle, a fragile structure of coverings and beams. This implies that although the Torah is interested in the natural universe, the home God makes for man, it is even more interested in the social universe, the home man makes for God.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 154)

Why Is This Happening to Me?

For me, the most personally transformative of all beliefs has been the idea of *hashgacha peratit*, divine providence. Whenever something unexpected has happened in my life, I have always asked, "What is Heaven trying to tell me? How does it want me to respond? Given that this has happened, how shall I turn this moment into a blessing?"

The result of that strong belief in providence, or as I sometimes put it, living-as-listening, has been to flood my life with meaning. For me, nothing just happens. It always comes with a call to respond in a particular kind of way.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life Changing Ideas*, pp. xix–xx)

Everything Has a Purpose

Life is meaningful. We are not mere accidents of matter, generated by a universe that came into being for no reason and will one day, for no reason, cease to be. We are here because a loving God brought the universe, and life, and us, into existence – a God who knows our fears, hears our prayers, believes in us more than we believe in ourselves, who forgives us when we fail, lifts us when we fall and gives us the strength to overcome despair. The historian Paul Johnson once wrote: "No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny."

(Rabbi Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration*, p. 22)

Man Seeks Meaning

No one did more to put the question of meaning into modern discourse than the late Viktor Frankl. In the three years he spent in Auschwitz, Frankl survived and helped others to survive by inspiring them to discover a purpose in life even in the midst of hell on earth. He knew that in the camps, those who lost the will to live died. It was there that he formulated the ideas he later turned into a new type of psychotherapy based on what he called "man's search for meaning." His book of that title, written in the course of nine days in 1946, has sold more than ten million copies throughout the world, and ranks as one of the most influential works of the twentieth century.

Frankl used to say that the way to find meaning was not to ask what we want from life. Instead we should ask what life wants from us. We are each, he said, unique: in our gifts, our abilities, our skills and talents, and in the circumstances of our life. For each of us, then, there is a task only we can do. This does not mean that we are better than others. But if we believe we are here for a reason, then there is a *tikkun*, a mending, only we can perform; a fragment of light only we can redeem; an act of kindness, or courage, or generosity, or hospitality only we can perform; even a word of encouragement or a smile only we can give, because we are here, in this place, at this time, facing this person at this moment in their lives.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, p. 122)

Frankl wrote: "Man should not ask, 'What is the meaning of my life?' but should realize that he himself is being questioned. Life is putting its problems to him, and it is up to him to respond to these questions by being responsible."

He can only answer to life by answering for his life. Life is a task. The religious man differs from the apparently irreligious man only by experiencing his existence not simply as a task, but as a mission. This means that he is also aware of the taskmaster, the source of his mission. For thousands of years that source has been called God."

(Rabbi Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, p. 37)

What Can We Change?

"See, I am setting before you today the blessing and the curse," (Deut. 11:26–28). That was Moses' insistent message in the last month of his life. There is always a choice. We can always choose to be free. Hence the life-changing idea: We are bigger than what happens to us. There is always a choice as to how to respond to what happens to us, and by exercising the strength to choose, we can rise above fate.

Victimhood focuses us on a past we can't change. Choice focuses us on a future we can change.

There really are victims in this world, and none of us should minimize their experiences. But in most cases (admittedly, not all) the most important thing we

can do is *help them recover their sense of agency*. This is never easy, but is essential if they are not to drown in their own learned helplessness. No one should ever blame a victim. But neither should any of us encourage a victim to stay a victim. It took immense courage for Holocaust survivors to rise above their victimhood, but what a victory they won for human freedom, dignity and responsibility.

Hence the life changing idea: You cannot change your past but you can change your future. There is always a choice.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 263–267)

Each Person Has a Mission

God enters our lives as a call from the future. It is as if we hear him beckoning to us from the far horizon of time, urging us to take a journey and undertake a task that, in ways we cannot fully understand, we were created for. That is the meaning of the word vocation, literally "a calling", a mission, a task to which we are summoned.

We are not here by accident. We are here because God wanted us to be, and because there is a task we were meant to fulfil. Discovering what that is, is not easy, and often takes many years and false starts.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, p. 24)

If Not in Heaven, Then Where?

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, "It is not up in heaven…nor is it beyond the sea" (Deut. 30:12–13) was: "*Kinderlech*, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of God at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So God found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes, He is Creator, Sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is *Shekhina*, from *shakhen*, the neighbor next door.

"So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the *Shema* twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world. When you can't see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He

seems absent, He is there behind the door, but you have to open it.

"Don't treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you don't have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life."

(Ibid. p. 286)

Is This a Losing Battle?

Once, after having spoken about some of these ideas, someone came up to me and said, "I appreciated your words. But don't you think you are fighting a losing battle?" It was a good question. When I see the isolation of Israel, and the demonization it suffers, and the return of antisemitism especially to university campuses; when I saw people marching in London under the banner of 'We're all Hizbollah Now'; when I see how little people learn from history, making the same mistakes time and again, I am almost tempted to agree, yes, perhaps this is a losing battle.

What I replied, though, was this: "Yes, the Jewish fight is a losing battle. It always was. Moses lost. Joshua lost. Jeremiah lost. We have striven for ideals just beyond our reach, hoped for a gracious society just beyond the possible, believed in a messianic age just over the furthest horizon, wrestled with the angel and emerged limping. And in the meanwhile, those who won have disappeared, and we are still here, still young, still full of vigor, still fighting the losing battle, never accepting defeat, refusing to resign ourselves to cynicism, or to give up hope of peace with those who, today as in the past, seek our destruction. That kind of losing battle is worth fighting, more so than any easy victory, any premature consolation."

(Rabbi Sacks, *Future Tense*, pp. 261–262)

All Our Eulogists Are Gone

In the Cairo Museum stands a giant slab of black granite known as the Merneptah stele. Originally installed by Pharaoh Amenhotep III in his temple in western

Thebes, it was removed by a later ruler of Egypt, Merneptah, who reigned in the thirteenth century BCE. Inscribed with hieroglyphics, it contains a record of Merneptah's military victories. Its interest might have been confined to students of ancient civilizations, were it not for the fact that it contains the first reference outside the Bible to the people of Israel. It lists the various powers crushed by Merneptah and his army. It concludes:

> All lands together, they are pacified;
> Everyone who was restless, he has been bound By the King of upper and lower Egypt.

Among those who were "restless" were a small people otherwise unmentioned in the early Egyptian texts. Merneptah or his chroniclers believed that they were now a mere footnote to history. They had not merely been defeated, they had been obliterated. This is what the stele says:

> Israel is laid waste, his seed is no more.

The first reference to Israel outside the Bible is an obituary. So is the second. This appears on a basalt slab dating from the ninth century BCE. It stands today in the Louvre. Known as the Mesha stele, it records the triumphs of Mesha, king of Moab. The king thanks his deity Chemosh for handing victory to the Moabites in their wars, and continues, "As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab for many years... but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel has perished forever."

The Jewish people has read its obituary many times, yet until now it survived.

(Ibid. pp. 49–50)

How We Define Ourselves

For more than three thousand years, Jews had defined themselves as a people loved by God. This preserved their self-respect during the ages of persecution. They might be seen by others as a pariah people, but they never internalized that image. They were chosen, different, holy; God's children, bearers of his covenant,

his witnesses in an often godless world.

At some stage Jews stopped defining themselves by the reflection they saw in the eyes of God and started defining themselves by the reflection they saw in the eyes of their Gentile neighbors. That was when they discovered that they were not loved; they were resented, envied, distrusted, looked down upon. The generation that came of age in the 1980s was not faced with Gentile disdain, but it was obsessed by the Holocaust. American Jews dedicated themselves to building Holocaust memorials, funding Holocaust programs at universities, writing books about it, organizing Holocaust seminars, and taking as their credo 'Never Again'.

The generation of American Jews raised on a diet of Holocaust education is deciding, at the rate of one in two, not to hand on Jewish identity to their children. For the most obvious reason: if people died in the Holocaust because their grandparents were Jewish, the best way of ensuring that your grandchildren will not die is to stop being Jewish. No one knowingly and willingly passes on misfortune to their children. Even the pioneer of Holocaust history, Lucy Dawidowicz, expressed her concern, towards the end of her life, that the community was focusing too much on that event. Children will grow up, she said, knowing about the Greeks and how they lived, the Romans and how they lived, the Jews and how they died. It was a disastrous turn in Jewish history, done for the highest possible motives, but profoundly misconceived.

If Jews and Judaism are to continue, the ambivalence many still feel about a faith and fate associated with suffering and persecution will have to be resolved. Jews will have to learn to walk tall; to recover the self-confidence, born of faith, that sustained Jews in the past; to remember that Judaism is about sanctifying life, not just commemorating death. Otherwise they will not want their children to belong to a club that will accept them as members. Ambivalence will be the death of Jewish identity.

(Ibid. pp. 59–60)

A Spiritual Response to Terrorism

The first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, said, "In Israel, to be a realist you have to believe in miracles." For Jews, faith is as necessary as life itself.

Without it the Jewish people would simply not have survived.

In 2001, after the Oslo peace process had broken down and the suicide bombings had begun, I told the then Israeli ambassador: "In the past, Israel's enemies have tried to put it in a military crisis and failed. Then they tried to put it in a political crisis and failed. Now they are about to put it in a *spiritual* crisis, and they may succeed."

That, ultimately, is what twenty-first-century terror is about, and Israel has been its most consistent target. The suicide bombings brought war from the battlefront to the buses of Haifa, the shops of Tel Aviv and the restaurants of Jerusalem. There were times when Jewish parents sent their children on the school bus not knowing whether they would see them alive again. The missiles of Hezbollah and Hamas placed two-thirds of Israel – the north and south – within their range. As I write, there are seven-year- old children in Sederot who have only known safety in a bomb shelter. The delegitimation of Israel among some media, academic and NGO circles has left its people feeling abandoned and alone. The aim is to intimidate and create despair, and it needs immense resources of faith and courage not to be affected. That is the spiritual crisis.

(Ibid. pp. 18–19)

Fragments of Light Amidst the Darkness

It is also the peculiar power of terror in the global age. It is not merely that terror deliberately attacks innocent civilians and etches everyday life with fear. It is rather that it takes the virtues of the open society and exploits them as vulnerabilities. One particularly poignant example came in the terror attacks on Mumbai in November 2008. Among the victims were a young rabbi and his wife, Gavriel and Rivkah Holzberg.

They were members of a group known as Chabad, or Lubavitch Hassidim. I did not know them personally, but they and I had been inspired by the same man, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the Rebbe of Lubavitch. He had done something no Jew had ever done before. He had sent emissaries throughout the world, wherever there were or could be Jews. Their role was to keep an open house and offer hospitality to strangers. That is what the Holzbergs had done. It is possible – so went several news stories at the time – that they had given food

and lodging to the people who subsequently murdered them.

I knew the Rebbe of Lubavitch. I am a rabbi today because of him. For years I wondered what led him to his extraordinary project. Judaism is not a missionary faith, nor had rabbis engaged in outreach to isolated or estranged Jews. Eventually I came up with a hypothesis, and it remains the only satisfying explanation I have heard. Rabbi Schneersohn, a Jewish mystic, believed in the idea of *tikkun*, that by our acts we can redeem a fractured world and rescue fragments of divine light from the heart of human darkness.

But he had lived through the Holocaust, in which almost the entire world of the Jewish mystics of Eastern Europe was destroyed. How do you redeem evil of that magnitude? I believe that he had come to the conclusion that if the Nazis had hunted down every Jew in hate, he would send his disciples to search out every Jew in love. That is what inspired me to become a rabbi.

After the tragedy of Mumbai, I began to ask myself whether such gestures are still possible in an age of terror. In Genesis 18, Abraham welcomed strangers and discovered that they were angels. The Holzbergs had welcomed strangers and found that they were murderers. Does terror show that openness is mere vulnerability? The answer must be 'no'. The Jewish way, of which the Rebbe was a supreme exemplar, is to rescue hope from tragedy. However dark the world, love still heals. Goodness still redeems. Terror, by defeating others, ultimately defeats itself, while the memory of those who offered kindness to strangers lives on.

(Ibid. pp. 19–20)

So, What Do We Do? Practical Jewish Responses to the Crisis

The Hebrew word "mitzvah," comes from the word "tzivui", to command, but also from the word "tzavta", together, and "tzevet", team. When we perform a mitzvah, we are doing what God commanded us, which when we think about it is also an act of bonding – together with other people, together with God — joining that mega-team called the Jewish People.

Which mitzvot exactly are we being called upon to perform at this time, and how, when and why?

The Jewish People have been through enormous challenges, but have always been known to respond with creativity, finding ways to carry on, gathering strength from its heritage, and gaining resilience specifically from the hardship. The following are a few responses to the current crisis.

Quality, Not Quantity

During a Zoom meeting, I was amazed to see a group of women from the Five Towns in New York, led by Nechama Kelhammer and Stephanie Sokol, reciting Psalms on behalf of the Jewish People for the first time. Nechama said a line, a whole verse, but the other women weren't able to repeat after her; they never received a Jewish education and didn't know a word of Hebrew. So, Nechama decided to break up the verses into words, and said one word at a time, slowly and clearly. All the other women on the Zoom call repeated after her, and they continued this way until the end of the chapter. For a minute I felt like I was in kindergarten, but with grown women. It was the slowest recitation of Psalms that I'd ever heard – but it was also, the most meaningful.

The Jewish Weapon

During a recent visit to London, I heard about a different Zoom meeting, numbering thousands of participants. On Saturday night, April 12, Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles toward Israel. During the hours before they were intercepted with the help of an international coalition, Jews around the world were worried and agitated.

Rabbi Nicky Liss, of Highgate Synagogue in London, related that after Shabbat ended, they heard the worrying news from Israel. "Since it was too late to bring people together in person, the United Synagogue arranged an online recital of Psalms and other prayers at 11 p.m. (1 a.m. Israel time), expecting forty to fifty people to join. However, the sense of love for Israel and worry for our brothers and sisters there was overwhelming, and 1,000 people joined, hitting the maximum allowed on the call. The number of complaints from people who weren't able to join was extraordinary."

They went on to arrange a second session an hour later, with upgraded technology enabling 2,500 people to join. The total – 3,500 screens – actually represents many more people, as behind most screens was an entire family joining in prayer for the people of Israel.

Healing Through Singing

The thousands of young people who managed to flee the Nova party massacre on October 7 have been receiving an outpouring of support from many different directions. One of the most beautiful initiatives takes place in the Neve Tzedek neighborhood of Tel Aviv. Every Saturday, a warm community Shabbat is held for them and for the displaced families who were evacuated to the hotels in the city.

I was invited to one of these Shabbatot. What distinguished the Nova survivors among all the other guests was that they didn't stop singing. Hours after the Shabbat meal ended, towards midnight, Avi, one of the survivors from the party, asked to sing another Shabbat song, and another one, without stopping. When I asked him about it, he explained: "I had friends who were murdered in front of my eyes, and friends who were kidnapped to Gaza. It's shattering; it breaks you. We were told that part of the healing process involves singing and rejoicing,

going back to believing in good, in love, in life," he said and then started singing another song.

Tefillin in Gaza

Since the start of the war, we've seen Jewish observance reach records highs.

IDF soldier Yishai Turgeman sent me a photo showing soldiers with tefillin and the following explanation: IDF Commander Noam Ramati had been involved in intense operational activity in Gaza with his soldiers on a certain day. The tefillin were in his bag, just a few feet away, but it was too dangerous to stop operations and put them on. After the sun had set, Noam felt dejected at having lost that spiritually priceless opportunity for that day. All the soldiers under Ramati's command felt his sorrow. The following day, all the soldiers, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof, asked to put on tefillin.

The previous day, Noam had missed putting on tefillin for the first time since his bar mitzvah; now dozens of soldiers were inspired to put on tefillin for the first time since *their* bar mitzvah!

First Time Fasters

Eyal Rosenman wrote the following just before the Tenth day of Tevet, a fast day commemorating the loss of our Holy Temple: "I heard from religious people in IDF reserves units that it was particularly difficult for them not to fast this year on the Tenth of Tevet; therefore, I have decided to observe this fast for the first time in my life. I realize that one doesn't make up for the other; but this nevertheless seems to me to be a deeply meaningful act." And Eyal wasn't alone. Many soldiers who couldn't fast due to their military obligations were moved to hear about people on the Home Front who were fasting this year for the first time.

Dancing Together

At a recent event in London, Rabbi Andrew Shaw, Chief Executive of Mizrachi UK, posed a poignant question: "What are we going to do next Simchat Torah?" Jews have always known how to dance through adversity, he stated, but how can we connect our Simchat Torah joy to recent events? How will we be able to

remember, and also, to dance?

Rabbi Shaw unveiled a new project to address these questions: Any shul worldwide can receive a special Torah mantle commemorating those who lost their lives since last Simchat Torah. Each mantle will feature one name, and the shul that receives it will connect to the memory of that person dance for the elevation of their soul. The project will span the globe – from London to Australia, New York to Tel Aviv – with thousands of Torah scrolls in thousands of shuls, connecting the entire Jewish world in one huge dance. "This project will bring more and more Jews to dance with the Torah scrolls, strengthening the Jewish life that our enemies tried to destroy."

Rabbi Shaw presented the first mantle, bearing the name of Capt. Daniel Perez, *Hy"d*, a tank commander who saved many lives on Simchas Torah and whose body was identified only recently, to Daniel's father, Rabbi Doron Perez. Rabbi Perez became very emotional, noting that Daniel would have turned twenty-three on Shabbat. Thanking Rabbi Shaw, he said, "The more difficult it is for us, the more convinced I am that we shall overcome. In Egypt we didn't stand a chance against Pharaoh, and similarly in Persia against Haman. We're now writing new chapters of heroism and faith in our history books, and we will win. Millions of Jews are reexamining their identity, and this new awareness is already part of our victory."

Embracing the Torah mantle, he said, "We already know how to cry together. Now we also need to rejoice together."

How does Rabbi Sacks recommend that we strengthen ourselves in times of crisis? What does he advise us to do, on the most immediate, practical level? The following selections are the tips and advice he dispensed over the years.

Giving Is Receiving

"If there is one thing I have heard more often than any other from those who spend part of their time in service to others, it is that they gain more than they give. They do not want to be thanked; they want to thank. Lifting others, they find that they themselves have been lifted."

(Rabbi Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 6)

Kierkegaard said: 'The door to happiness opens outwards.'

I learned this from Holocaust survivors. At first it was difficult to understand how they survived at all, how they lived with their memories, knowing what they knew and having seen what they saw. Yet they were, and are, some of the most life-affirming people I have ever met.

In later life they began to tell their stories, especially to young people. They used to visit schools. Sometimes I went with them. They spoke about what had happened, and how they survived. But their fundamental message was not about the past at all. What they wanted young people to know was how precious freedom is, and how fragile; what a miracle it is that there is food to eat, windows you can open, gates you can walk out of, a future to look forward to. They spoke about tolerance and how important it is to care for the people who are different from you.

Never take freedom for granted – that was their message. Work for it, fight for it, stand up especially for minorities, and never give way to hate even when others do.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, p. 256)

True Friendship: The Power of Discussion

And the bridge between self and other is conversation: speaking and listening. When we speak, we tell others who and what we are. But when we listen, we allow others to tell us who they are. This is the supremely revelatory moment. And if we can't listen to other people, then we certainly can't listen to God.

Listening to another human being, let alone God, is an act of opening ourselves up to a mind radically other than our own. This takes courage. To listen is to make

myself vulnerable. My deepest certainties may be shaken by entering into the mind of one who thinks quite differently about the world. But it is essential to our humanity. It is the antidote to narcissism: the belief that we are the centre of the universe.

Listening is a profoundly spiritual act. It can also be painful. It is comfortable not to have to listen, not to be challenged, not to be moved outside our comfort zone.

Listening is the greatest gift we can give to another human being. To be listened to, to be heard, is to know that someone else takes me seriously. That is a redemptive act.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 260–261)

Family: The Backbone

The Jews became an intensely family-oriented people, and it was this that saved us from tragedy. After the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, Jews were scattered throughout the world, everywhere a minority, everywhere without rights, suffering some of the worst persecutions ever known by a people, and yet Jews survived because they never lost three things: their sense of family, their sense of community, and their faith.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Morality*, p. 73)

The Jewish Family

To this day, Judaism is a religion of the family. Marriage, one of the most vulnerable of human institutions, is protected in Jewish life by a whole host of laws, rituals, and customs to do with modesty, the separation of the sexes, and the laws of "family purity."

The home is the center of many of Judaism's most sacred institutions: the Sabbath, the festivals, the dietary laws, and education as the conversation between the generations. There is something exceptionally gracious about Jewish family life at its best. On Friday evenings, as the candles are lit, and the blessings made over the wine and bread, as the family sings its song of praise to the mother and parents bless their children, you can almost touch the Divine

presence. And there is something moving about the fact that the Divine presence is here, in ordinary families in ordinary homes, rather than in the palaces of the great or the cathedrals of the many.

Here if anywhere you witness the Jewish truth that God lives in the unadorned heart of the human situation, in the covenantal love between husband and wife on which the republic of faith is built.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 83)

Community: The Strength of 'Together'

Judaism is a supremely social faith, built around the concept of *vayak'hel*, the act of gathering together as a community. Our holiest prayers cannot be said without a community. On the High Holy Days we confess publicly, together, not "my sins" but "ours." We pray for the sick, and comfort mourners, by grouping them with "the others" who are similarly afflicted.

Judaism is constructed in the first-person plural of togetherness. We know perfectly well that we are imperfect; that we all lack something. Even Moses needed an Aaron and Miriam. That is why a holy act or prayer requires a community, because what we lack individually, we hope to achieve collectively. All-of-us is greater than any-of-us.

That is something we are in grave danger of forgetting, especially with the spread of smartphones and social media. The evidence is rapidly accumulating that virtual relationships are not the same as face-to-face ones and that social media-generated crowds are quite different from communities. ...being part of a community is good for health, happiness, and the successful negotiation of life's challenges. Hence the life-changing idea: Happiness lies beyond the self, in the strength of our relationships, our connections to community, and in what we give to and are given by others.

(Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 116)

Music

There is something profoundly spiritual about music. When language aspires to the transcendent, and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the

earth, it modulates into song. Jewish history is not so much read as sung.

Many biblical texts speak of the power of music to restore the soul. When Saul was depressed, David would play for him and his spirit would be restored (1 Sam. 16). David himself was known as the "sweet singer of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). Elisha called for a harpist to play so that the prophetic spirit could rest upon him (2 Kings 3:15). The Levites sang in the Temple. Every day, in Judaism, we preface our morning prayers with *Pesukei deZimra*, the 'Verses of Song' with their magnificent crescendo, Psalm 150, in which instruments and the human voice combine to sing God's praises.

I once watched a teacher explaining to young children the difference between a physical possession and a spiritual one. He had them build a paper model of Jerusalem. Then he played a song about Jerusalem on a cassette tape, and taught the song to the class. At the end of the session he did something very dramatic. He tore up the model and shredded the tape. He asked the children, "Do we still have the model?" They replied, No. "Do we still have the song?" They replied, Yes.

We lose physical possessions, but not spiritual ones.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*, "The Spirituality of Song")

Faith: Through the Crack

My late father of blessed memory was not a learned Jew. He did not have the chance to become one. He came to Britain as a child and a refugee. He had to leave school young, and besides, the possibilities of Jewish education in those days were limited. Merely surviving took up most of the family's time. But I saw him walk tall as a Jew, unafraid, even defiant at times, because when he prayed or read the Psalms he felt intensely that God was with him. That simple faith gave him immense dignity and strength of mind.

That was his heritage from Jacob, as it is ours. Though we may fall, we fall into the arms of God. Though others may lose faith in us, and though we may even lose faith in ourselves, God never loses faith in us. And though we may feel utterly alone, we are not. God is there, beside us, within us, urging us to stand and move on, for there is a task to do that we have not yet done and that we were created to fulfil. Leonard Cohen wrote in one of his songs, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." The broken heart lets in the light of God,

and becomes the gate of heaven.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, p. 32)

Prayer: Nothing More Whole Than a Broken Heart

Sometimes it is when we feel most alone that we discover we are not alone. We can encounter God in the midst of fear or a sense of failure.

Perhaps no one spoke more movingly about this condition than King David in his most agitated psalms. In psalm 69 he speaks as if he were drowning: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold" (Ps. 69:2–3). And the equally famous, "Out of the depths I cry to You, Lord" (Ps. 130:1).

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 33)

Sometimes our deepest spiritual experiences come when we least expect them, when we are closest to despair. It is then that the masks we wear are stripped away. We are at our point of maximum vulnerability – and it is when we are most fully open to God that God is most fully open to us. "The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps.34:18). "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise"(Ps. 51:17). God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps. 147:3).

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov used to say; "A person needs to cry to his Father in heaven with a powerful voice from the depths of his heart. Then God will listen to his voice and turn to his cry. And it may be that from this act itself, all doubts and obstacles that are keeping him back from true service of Hashem will fall from him and be completely nullified."

We find God not only in holy or familiar places but also in the midst of a journey, alone at night. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me." The most profound of all spiritual experiences, the base of all others, is the knowledge that we are not alone. God is holding us by the hand, sheltering us, lifting us when we fall, forgiving us when we fail, healing the wounds in our soul through the power of His love.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*, pp. 31–32)

There may be times in our lives – certainly there have been in mine – when the sun disappears and we enter the cloud of black despair. King David knew these feelings well. They are the theme of several psalms. People can be brutal to one another. There are some who, having suffered pain themselves, find relief in inflicting it on others. You can lose faith in humanity, or in yourself, or both. At such times, the knowledge that God has faith in us is transformative, redemptive. As David said: "Even were my father or mother to forsake me, the Lord would still receive me" (Ps. 27:10)

(Rabbi Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas,* p. 7)

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel prize winning writer, once speculated that Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, speaks not about human death but about Divine life, as if it were our way of offering comfort to God for the loss of one of His children. Mortality is written into the human condition, but so too is the possibility of immortality, in the good we do that continues, long after we are here, to beget further good. There are lives that defeat death and redeem existence from tragedy.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Letters to the Next Generation* 2)

Study: Torah in a Time of Crisis

Throughout the twenty-two years that I served as chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, my team and I faced many challenges. Early on, whenever this happened, we developed the habit of sitting down and studying Torah together. We would search for the most appropriate text, and let it speak to us. It was astonishing how often it did so. That was when we discovered that there are three types of Torah. Two we were familiar with: the Torah you learn from books, and the Torah you learn from teachers. The leadership challenges taught us a third kind: the Torah you learn from life.

It was fascinating to discover how much of the Torah is, in fact, about leadership, not in the narrow sense of holding formal office, but rather as a general approach to life. The heroes and heroines of the Torah, the patriarchs and matriarchs and their children, and the Israelites as they left Egypt and journeyed to the Promised

Land, were all faced with the responsibilities of freedom. That, it seems to me, is the central drama of Judaism.

The ancient Greeks produced a monumental literature about character and fate, with larger-than-life heroes and often tragic outcomes. Ancient Israel produced a quite different literature about will and choice, with figures with whom we can identify, often battling with their own emotions against defeat and despair.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*, p. xix)

Shabbat: A Palace in Time

Shabbat. The day of rest when we give our marriages and families what they most need and are most starved of in the contemporary world, namely, time. While making a television documentary for the BBC on the state of family life in Britain, I took the person who was then Britain's leading expert on childcare, Penelope Leach, to a Jewish primary school on a Friday morning.

There she saw the children enacting in advance what they would see that evening around the family table. There were the five-eyar-old mother and father blessing the five-year-old children with the five-year-old grandparents looking on. She was fascinated by this whole institution, and she asked the children what they most enjoyed about the Sabbath. One five-year-old boy turned to her and said, "It's the only night of the week when Daddy doesn't have to rush off." As we walked away from the school when the filming was over, she turned to me and said, "Chief Rabbi, that Sabbath of yours is saving their parents' marriages."

(Rabbi Sacks, *Morality*, p. 73)

Shabbat: A Taste of Paradise

Shabbat is the ultimate expression of a free society, the antithesis of slavery in Egypt. On this day, all relationships of dominance and subordination are suspended. We may not work, or command others to work, 'so that your manservant and maidservant may rest as you do' (Deut. 5:15)

(*The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*, p. 78)

No utopia has ever been realised (the word 'utopia' itself means 'no place') – with one exception: 'the world to come'. The reason is that we rehearse it every week, one day in seven. The Sabbath is a full dress rehearsal for an ideal society that has not yet come to pass, but will do, because we know what we are aiming for – because we experienced it at the beginning.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus*, pp. 282–282)

Shabbat is where a restless people rested and renewed itself. In ages of oppression it reminded Jews they were free. For my grandparents and their generation, it meant rest from physical exhaustion. For my contemporaries it means release from psychological fatigue and stress. Judah Halevi once said that on Shabbat the poorest Jew was freer than the greatest king, and he was right. In political terms it was the day on which Jews, often oppressed by the world outside, relinquished their burdens and breathed free air. In human terms it was and is the time when we stop making a living and instead simply live...

Shabbat is the holy time of a people that found truth in time. The ancient world had holy places, holy objects, holy people. But the first thing the Bible calls holy is time itself: "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." So Shabbat became our moment of eternity in the midst of time, our glimpse of a world at peace under the sovereignty of God. Within the cycle of the week it creates a delicate rhythm of action and reflection, making and enjoying, running and standing still. Without that pause, Jews might never have continued the journey. Still today, without Shabbat, we risk making the journey while missing the view.

(Rabbi Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, pp. 135–136)

Joy: Rejoice in the Little Things

What redeems life and etches it with the charisma of grace is joy: joy in your work ("The sleep of a worker is sweet" – Eccl. 5:11), joy in your marriage ("See life with the woman you love" – Ibid. 9:9), and joy in the simple pleasures of life. Take joy in each day. Above all, rejoice when you are young. You do not need to be blind to the imperfections of the human world or the slow ravages of age in order to rejoice. You can know life with all its flaws and still have joy.

Joy lives in the moment. It asks no questions about tomorrow. It celebrates the

power of now. The Talmud says that each Sunday, Shammai, the great sage of the late Second Temple period, was already preparing for Shabbat. Hillel, however, lived by a different principle: "Blessed be God day by day" (*Beitzah* 16a). Joy blesses God day by day. It celebrates the mere fact of being here, now, existing when we might not have existed, inhaling to the full this day, this hour, this eternity-in-a-moment that was not before and will not be again. Joy embraces the contingency of life. It knows that yesterday has gone and tomorrow is unknown. It does not ask what was or will be. It makes no calculations. It is a state of radical thankfulness for the gift of being. Even in an age too fraught for happiness, there can still be joy…

Joy does not ask how long it will last. It discovers epiphany in the here and now…

Joy alone… has the power to defeat despair. It does not speak the language of reason… It says, yes, life is sometimes unfair and the world unjust, but the very brevity of life makes each moment precious. It says: stop thinking of tomorrow. Celebrate, sing, join the dance however undignified it makes you look. Joy bathes life with light. It liberates the soul from the prison of the self… Joy solves no problems but it gives us the strength to keep searching. It sustains the faith we need if we are, in the year ahead, to face the future without fear and heal some of the fractures of our injured world…

Judaism is no comforting illusion that all is well in this dark world. It is instead the courage to celebrate in the midst of uncertainty.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration,* pp. 164–166)

The End
(Which Is Just The Beginning)

I'm writing this after a Shabbat spent hosting Omer Barak and his partner, Rotem Nir-Nahmias, at our home in Jerusalem. Omer is a bestselling Israeli author and screenwriter. Before October 7, he identified as secular, left-wing, a resident of Tel Aviv. However, since the onset of the war, he penned one of his most popular posts, reflecting the profound changes in his perspective:

> As part of my soul-searching, and the things that I've changed my mind about, three words come to mind, words that I'd refused to say until now: *I'm a Jew*. Wow, how I hated those words. When speaking abroad, I'd introduce myself as Israeli, and if asked if I was Jewish, I'd respond that I was born Jewish, but had no connection to Judaism. This past week, that response has haunted me, leaving me restless and agitated.
>
> I think I simply didn't want to believe that I was that boy with the cap from the infamous Holocaust photo. As a man of the world—an author, journalist, and screenwriter—Judaism was never part of my identity. Even my ID card doesn't list me as Jewish.
>
> But I was wrong. I may not be the boy with the cap, but I am a Jew. And for the first time in my life, I understand that no matter how hard I try, I can't escape that fact.
>
> For the first time in my life, I realize that I don't want to escape it. I'm proud to be a Jew, and ashamed that I denied my Jewishness until now. So I am searching for my Jewishness, searching for my God. I will explore the identity that for generations and centuries, people have tried to destroy, and which I almost destroyed by my own doing.
>
> Today I lit Shabbat candles with my children for the first time in my life. (We didn't know what blessing to say, so we said the blessing over Chanukah candles.) And I prayed – for the captives, for the soldiers, for

> us. I don't know if I'll do it every week; I have no idea where this journey will take me, but I do know that I am Omer Barak, author, journalist, screenwriter — an Israeli ... and a Jew.

The Shabbat with Omer and Rotem was emotional and eye-opening for us as well. We started by lighting the candles with the appropriate blessing —for Shabbat, not Chanukah — followed by long, heartfelt talks. It was a discussion that could never have taken place on social media, or on a weekday. I'll venture to say it could never have taken place before October 7, 2023. And that's why this isn't really the closing chapter of this booklet.

We've just begun.

Whether in areas between man and God, or between man and his fellow, these are days with tremendous potential for repair. The Jewish world is on the brink of a historic opportunity for revival; to write together a story of rebuilding, of faith and hope, a story that will serve, first and foremost as a light unto ourselves, and afterward, as a light unto the nations.

Israel – if it understands its historic mission – is currently an island of moral clarity in a world that is collapsing from all sides: Iran and Gaza at one extreme, Harvard and Columbia University at the other. In one place all is forbidden, and in the other, all appears to be permitted. But there's a third option: Jerusalem. That's why we returned here.

The question is if we, together with our friends and partners in the world, understand that the Jewish democracy in the Middle East is not the world's problem but the beginning of the solution. Do we realize that the time has come for us to learn about and sound our own, authentic voice? Do we dare to declare the international court of justice must ultimately be located not in the Hague, but in Jerusalem?

* * *

This booklet presents a tiny taste of the immense richness and profundity to be found in every Jewish bookshelf. My deepest hope is that we all continue to learn, ask questions and take action.

Rabbi Sacks would encourage his listeners to take the inspiration they received,

from their meeting with him and with Judaism, and to translate that into action. To take upon themselves one mitzvah, one good deed, one area of interest and embrace it with all their strength – and from there to continue moving forward.

He directed people never to suffice with a momentary surge of emotion that eventually passes and is gone. When it comes to material acquisitions, it's very good to be satisfied with what you have, but in the spiritual realm we must constantly strive for more — more good deeds and learning, more connecting to community, to our identity, our roots. Life is a journey of constantly moving forward.

After the Holocaust, Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan said, "They destroyed a third of the Jewish People; now each one of us must be a Jew times three."

The same holds true today. So many people have decided to take action on behalf of the souls of those who lost their lives since October 7. But those deeds have no less of an impact on our own souls, here in this world.

These are not conventional times, and this is not a conventional booklet. After being shaken to the core, the Jewish world stands at a crossroads, teeming with unique opportunities for renewal and revival, both individual and collective.

If this work has touched your heart, sparked thoughts or led you to pivotal decisions; if you have questions about what it means to be Jewish or feel a yearning to do more, learn more, or find a community; or if If you have something personal to share or a message you wish to broadcast to the world, I would be truly delighted to connect with you.

Please reach out to me at **sivanrahavmeir@gmail.com.**

Sincerely,

Sivan Rahav-Meir

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 UK 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. He served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth for 22 years, between 1991 and 2013.

Sivan Rahav-Meir is an Israeli media personality and lecturer. She was voted by Globes newspaper as the most popular female media personality in Israel, and by the Jerusalem Post as one of the 50 most influential Jews in the world. Sivan began her career at the age of six, reporting for a children's news magazine. She became religious as a teenager, and has since been working for national print and broadcast media. She teaches Torah through various platforms, including the weekly podcast "Sivan Says" in English. Her inspirational "Daily Thought" is translated into 17 languages. Sivan lives in Jerusalem with her husband Yedidya and their five children.

When I stand today in Jerusalem, or in a Jewish school, or see a Jewish couple under the wedding canopy, or see parents at the Shabbat table blessing their children, there are times when I am overcome with tears, not in sadness nor in joy, but in awe at this people who came face-to-face with the angel of death and refused to give it a final victory. The Jewish people live, and still bear witness to the living God.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

This booklet aims, through the teachings of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, to address the burning questions of our times: What does it mean to be a Jew? Why are we so hated? What is the meaning of evil? Where can we find an anchor of stability when everything around us seems to be collapsing? From where do we derive strength? What is our mission, and how do we grow from this crisis to a better future?

Sivan Rahav-Meir

Scan to download a PDF of this booklet

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

מגיד
MAGGID