LETTERS TO THE NEXT GENERATION

REFLECTIONS ON JEWISH LIFE

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
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The two original *Letters to the Next Generation* booklets were dedicated in memory of Susi and Fred Bradfield z”l.

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### Why I Am a Jew

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Young Jews today are asking some very difficult questions about religion in general and Judaism in particular. Does faith make sense? Aren’t the new atheists right? Isn’t religion based on ideas that have been disproved or at least overtaken by science? Can we really believe in a God who cares for us when He doesn’t prevent natural disasters, disease or terror attacks? Can we believe in the Jewish God after the Holocaust?

As for Judaism: Yes, it may have given humanity world-changing ideas. But the world now has those ideas. Do we really need to stay different, distinctive, set apart? Isn’t Judaism simply irrelevant to the twenty-first century? And if it is still relevant, why are there so many laws? Why can’t we just focus on the essentials? Beneath the surface of these questions are some more fundamental ones: Why be Jewish? Why
stay Jewish? Why live a Jewish life? How does it help you to be the person you want to be?

To try and answer some of the questions, I published the first edition of *Letters to the Next Generation* in 2009, a series of short reflections cast in the form of letters written by a father to his children who’ve just become parents in their own right. In 2011, I published a second edition, using the same format, but this time written as letters to two Jewish university students.

Both editions, distributed in synagogues in the UK just before *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, aimed to answer some of the questions above and discussed the big issues that shape our lives and those close to us. The letters were fictional, but the issues they raised were real.

Compiled especially for The Prizmah Conference, this booklet features a selection of letters from the first two editions of *Letters to the Next Generation*. Part one features six written to the author’s fictional children, Sara and David. Part two features a further eight written to Ruth and Michael, two fictional Jewish university students.

The concluding letter is an edited extract from my book *Radical Then, Radical Now* (published as *A Letter in the Scroll* in the United States), which was also released
as a whiteboard animation in 2015 called ‘Why I am a Jew’. This letter is my own personal credo about what Judaism means to me and why I am proud to be a Jew.

As you go about your vital work in Jewish education, I hope you will find these letters a helpful educational resource. A PDF version of this booklet, together with both editions of Letters to the Next Generation, are available to download for free from our website: www.RabbiSacks.org/Education. There, you will also find other free educational resources produced by our office including the Ten Paths to God curriculum, the Family Edition of Covenant & Conversation (my weekly parsha commentary), videos and whiteboard animations and much more which I hope will be of interest.

With blessings and best wishes,

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
March 2019 / Adar II 5779
Part One

To Sara and David...
S ARA, DAVID, I want to talk about children. God has blessed you both with children. They are the joy of our life, as of yours. Enjoy them. Spend time with them. Play, learn, sing, daven and do mitzvot with them. On nothing else will your time be better spent. The love you give them when they are young will stay with them throughout their lives. Like sunshine it will make them flower and grow.

Having children is more than a gift. It’s a responsibility. For us as Jews it’s the most sacred responsibility there is. On it depends the future of the Jewish people. For four thousand years our people survived because in every generation, Jews made it their highest priority to hand their faith on to their children. They sanctified marriage. They consecrated the Jewish home. They built schools and houses of study. They saw education as the conversation between the generations: “You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children,
speaking of them when you sit at home or travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up”.

They saw Judaism the way an English aristocrat sees a stately home. You live in it but you don’t really own it. It’s handed on to you by your ancestors and it’s your task to hand it on to future generations, intact, preserved, if possible beautified and enhanced, and you do so willingly because you know that this is your legacy. It’s what makes your family different, special. To lose it, sell it or let it fall into ruins, would be a kind of betrayal.

And that is the point. Today, on average throughout the Diaspora, one young Jew in two is deciding not to marry another Jew, build a Jewish home, have Jewish children and continue the Jewish story. That is tragic.

Your mother and I didn’t spend too much time talking to you about our own family histories. But the truth is that virtually every Jew alive today has a history more remarkable than the greatest novel or family saga. It tells of how they were expelled from one country after another, how they lost everything and had to begin again. They were offered every blandishment to convert, but they said ‘No’. They sacrificed everything to have Jewish grandchildren. And today when being a Jew demands almost no sacrifice, when we are freer to
Being a Jewish Parent

practise our faith than ever before, Jews are forgetting what it takes to have Jewish grandchildren.

So how do you hand your values on? By showing your children what you love. Rabbi Moshe Alshich, the sixteenth century rabbi, asked in his commentary to the *Shema*, “How do we ‘teach these things’ to our children? How can we be sure that they will learn?” His reply? “The answer lies in the verse two lines earlier: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might”. What we love, they will love.

There are many reasons for the high rates of assimilation in Jewish life, but one is fundamental. We are heirs to several generations of Jews who were ambivalent about being Jewish. I don’t pass judgment on them, neither should you. Between the 1880s and the 1930s they lived through an age of antisemitism. Then came the Holocaust. Who would blame anyone in those days for saying, as did Heinrich Heine, “Judaism isn’t a religion, it’s a misfortune”.

But we are long past those days. One of the greatest gifts you can give your children is to let them see you carry your identity with pride. Your mother and I tried to show you as best we could that for us Judaism is our legacy, our stately home, our gift from those who
came before us; the greatest attempt in all of history to create a life of justice, compassion and love as a way of bringing the Divine presence down from heaven to earth so that it etches our lives with the soft radiance of eternity.

We can’t live our children’s lives for them. They are free. They will make their own choices. But we can show them what we love. If you want Jewish grandchildren, love Judaism and live in it with a sense of privilege and joy.
SARA, DAVID, send your children to Jewish schools. They are the pride of our community. They are our best investment in the Jewish future. A generation ago, Jewish schools were often seen as second-best. They were where you sent your children if they couldn’t get in elsewhere. Today, rightly, they are a first choice for many. That is a tribute to their excellence.

But they are more than that. For Jews, education is not just what we know. It’s who we are. No people ever cared for education more. Our ancestors were the first to make education a religious command, and the first to create a compulsory universal system of schooling — eighteen centuries before Britain. The rabbis valued study as higher even than prayer. Almost 2,000 years ago, Josephus wrote: “Should anyone of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education
in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls.”

The Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built temples, the Romans built amphitheatres. Jews built schools. They knew that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. So Jews became the people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. How can we deprive our children of that heritage?

Can you really be educated without knowing Shakespeare or Mozart or Michelangelo or the basic principles of physics, economics or politics? Can you be an educated Jew without at least a basic familiarity with Tanakh and Talmud, the classic Torah commentaries, the poetry of Judah Halevi, the philosophy of Maimonides, and the history of the Jewish people? Jews in Eastern Europe used to say, “To be an apikores (heretic) is understandable, but to be an am ha’aretz (ignoramus) is unforgiveable”.

My children, I hope we taught you enough to know that the first duty of a Jewish parent is to ensure that their children have a Jewish education. For almost a century that whole value-system was in disarray because Jewish life was in disarray. Jews were in flight
from persecution, first from Eastern Europe, then from Western Europe, then from Arab lands. They were preoccupied by rebuilding their lives and ensuring that their children were integrated into the wider society. Jewish education was a casualty of those times. But not now. Today we’ve begun to recover something of the tradition. Yet our standards are still far too low.

The world is changing ever faster. In a single generation, nowadays, there is more scientific and technological advance than in all previous centuries since human beings first set foot on earth. In uncharted territory, you need a compass. That’s what Judaism is. It guided our ancestors through good times and bad. It gave them identity, security, and a sense of direction. It enabled them to cope with circumstances more varied than any other people have ever known. It lifted them, often, to heights of greatness. Why? Because Judaism is about learning. Education counts for more in the long run than wealth or power or privilege. Those who know, grow.

“All your children shall be taught of the Lord” said Isaiah, “and great shall be the peace of your children”. Give your children a deep and wide Jewish education and you will be giving them the peace of knowing who they are and why.
There are only two other things more powerful still. First, practise at home what your children learn at school. Children need to see consistency. Otherwise they become confused, and eventually rebel.

Second, let your children be your teachers. Over the Shabbat table, let them share with you what they have learned at school during the week. You will be amazed at the pride you give them because you have allowed them to give something to you.
SARA, DAVID, you may wonder from time to time why your mother and I care so much about being Jewish. It’s a fair question, and this is my honest answer: Somehow, long ago, Jews were touched and transformed by a truth greater than themselves.

They were the first to encounter God as a presence within, yet beyond, the universe. This changed everything, for if there is only one God and every human being is in His image, it means that every human being has non-negotiable dignity. It means that human life is sacred. It means that in some ultimate sense we are all equal. And if the universe is the free creation of the free God, then we, in His image, are also free. From this flowed the system we call morality and all it implies by way of personal and collective responsibility.

Jews were the first people to understand the significance of human responsibility and freedom, the first to conceive of a society of equal dignity, the first to
understand that right matters more than might, and a whole list of other insights that eventually revolutionised Western civilisation. Judaism inspired two other religions, Christianity and Islam, that between them today count more than half the 7.6 billion people on earth as their adherents. And even when Jews rebelled against Judaism, they did so in world-changing ways: Spinoza, the founder of political liberalism, Karl Marx, the revolutionary, and Sigmund Freud, the doctor of the soul. I think all three were profoundly wrong, but they were all profound.

And Judaism is as relevant today as it ever was. Non-Jews admire Judaism for our strong families and communities, our commitment to education and the excellence of our schools, the emphasis we place on chessed and tzedakah, on practical acts of kindness and generosity. The Jewish voice is sought on questions of medical, social and business ethics. People respect Judaism for its wisdom and insight. It has integrity without fanaticism. It has strong principles without seeking to impose them on others. It has humour and humanity.

Of course, Judaism is demanding. There are so many laws, so many details, that you can sometimes lose sight of the big picture. It’s like the first French impressionists. At first people could see only brush-
strokes and confusion. It took time before they realised that Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and the rest were capturing the play of light on surfaces and producing a whole new way of seeing. Judaism can look like a blur of laws and customs, until you realise that it’s a whole new way of living. *Halakhah*, Jewish law, is about translating the highest of ideals into the simplest of acts.

Here’s the paradox: Most people think that more people would keep Judaism if only it were easier, less demanding. Why all the commandments, 613 of them? Wouldn’t it be better if we made being Jewish simpler?

Let’s see: Think of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Which of the three is kept, on average, by the greatest number of Jews? More people keep Pesach than Sukkot. More people keep Sukkot than Shavuot. That’s true wherever you go in the Jewish world.

Now ask, which is the most demanding? Pesach is by far the most difficult. It involves cleaning the house, koshering the kitchen, using special utensils, and much else besides. Next comes Sukkot. You have to buy a *lulav* and *etrog*. You have to make a *Sukkah*. Easiest by far is Shavuot, which has no special *mitzvah*, unless you count staying up late on the first night for a *Tikkun*. So, the harder a festival is to keep, the more people keep it.
Now think of the hardest day of all, one in which there is no eating or drinking, no joy or celebration, on which you spend the entire day in shul, thinking of all the things you did wrong. A perfect formula, you would have thought, for making sure that no one keeps it at all.

But of course the opposite is true. Yom Kippur, when all these things happen, is the day on which more Jews come to shul than any other in the entire year.

It’s counterintuitive but true: the things we value most are the things that are the most demanding. That’s true of study; it’s true at work; it’s true in sport; and it’s true in matters of the spirit. Things that cost us little, we cherish little. What matter most to us are the things we make sacrifices for. If Judaism had been easier, it would have died out long ago.

Never doubt that it’s a privilege to be a Jew. Head for head our people have done more to transform the world than any other. There are easier ways to live, but none more challenging. God asks great things of our people. That’s what made our people great.
SARA, DAVID, wisdom is free, yet it is also the most expensive thing there is, for we tend to acquire it through failure or disappointment or grief. That is why we try to share our wisdom, so that others will not have to pay the price for it that we paid. These are some of the things Judaism has taught me about life, and I share them with you:

- Never try to be clever. Always try to be wise.
- Respect others even if they disrespect you.
- Never seek publicity for what you do. If you deserve it, you will receive it. If you don’t, you will be attacked. In any case, goodness never needs to draw attention to itself.
- When you do good to others, it is yourself, your conscience and your self-respect, that will be the beneficiary. The greatest gift of giving is the opportunity to give.
In life, never take shortcuts. There is no success without effort, no achievement without hard work.

Keep your distance from those who seek honour. Be respectful, but none of us is called on to be a looking glass for those in love with themselves.

In everything you do, be mindful that God sees all we do. There is no cheating God. When we try to deceive others, usually the only person we succeed in deceiving is ourself.

Be very slow indeed to judge others. If they are wrong, God will judge them. If we are wrong, God will judge us.

Greater by far than the love we receive is the love we give.

It was once said of a great religious leader, that he was a man who took God so seriously that he never felt the need to take himself seriously at all. That is worth aspiring to.

Use your time well. Life is short, too short to waste on television, computer games and unnecessary emails; too short to waste on idle gossip, or envying others for what they have, too short for anger and indignation; too
short to waste on criticising others. “Teach us to number our days”, says the Psalm, “that we may get a heart of wisdom”. But any day on which you have done some good to someone has not been wasted.

You will find much in life to distress you. People can be careless, cruel, thoughtless, offensive, arrogant, harsh, destructive, insensitive, and rude. That is their problem, not yours. Your problem is how to respond. “No one”, a wise lady once said, “can make you feel inferior without your permission”. The same applies to other negative emotions. Don’t react. Don’t respond. Don’t feel angry, or if you do, pause for as long as it takes for the anger to dissipate, and then carry on with the rest of life. Don’t hand others a victory over your own emotional state. Forgive, or if you can’t forgive, ignore.

If you tried and failed, don’t feel bad. God forgives our failures as soon as we acknowledge them as failures – and that spares us from the self-deception of trying to see them as success. No one worth admiring ever succeeded without many failures on the way. The great poets
wrote bad poems; the great artists painted undistinguished canvases; not every symphony by Mozart is a masterpiece. If you lack the courage to fail, then you lack the courage to succeed.

▶ Always seek out the friendship of those who are strong where you are weak. None of us has all the virtues. Even a Moses needed an Aaron. The work of a team, a partnership, a collaboration with others who have different gifts or different ways of looking at things, is always greater than any one individual can achieve alone.

▶ Create moments of silence in your soul if you want to hear the voice of God.

▶ If something is wrong, don’t blame others. Ask, how can I help to put it right?

▶ Always remember that you create the atmosphere that surrounds you. If you want others to smile, you must smile. If you want others to give, you must give. If you want others to respect you, you must show your respect for them. How the world treats us is a mirror of how we treat the world.
Be patient. Sometimes the world is slower than you are. Wait for it to catch up with you, for if you are on the right path, eventually it will.

Never have your ear so close to the ground that you can’t hear what an upright person is saying.

Never worry when people say that you are being too idealistic. It is only idealistic people who change the world, and do you really want, in the course of your life, to leave the world unchanged?

Be straight, be honest, and always do what you say you are going to do. There really is no other way to live.
ARA, DAVID, in my last letter I spoke about some of the things I learned from Judaism about life. In this, I want to share some of the things I have learned from life about Judaism.

▶ Never ever be embarrassed about being a Jew. Our people has survived so long and contributed so much, that you should see being Jewish as an honour and a responsibility.

▶ Some people look down on Jews: they always have. In which case, we have to walk tall, so that, to see our face, they are forced to look up.

▶ Never compromise your principles because of others. Don’t compromise on kashrut or any other Jewish practice because you happen to find yourself among non-Jews or non-religious Jews. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism.
They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.

Never look down on others. Never think that being Jewish means looking down on gentiles. It doesn’t. Never think that being a religious Jew entitles you to look down on nonreligious Jews. It doesn’t. The greatest Jew, Moses, was also, according to the Torah, “the humblest person on the face of the earth”. Humility does not mean self-abasement. True humility is the ability to see good in others without worrying about yourself.

Never stop learning. I once met a woman who was 103 and yet who still seemed youthful. What, I asked her, was her secret? She replied, “Never be afraid to learn something new”. Then I realised that learning is the true test of age. If you are willing to learn, you can be 103 and still young. If you aren’t, you can be 23 and already old.

Never confuse righteousness with self-righteousness. They sound similar, but they are opposites. The righteous see the good in people; the self-righteous see the bad. The righteous make you feel bigger; the self-righteous
make you feel small. The righteous praise; the self-righteous criticise. The righteous are generous; the self-righteous, grudging and judgmental. Once you know the difference, keep far from the self-righteous, who come in all forms, right and left, religious and secular. Win the respect of people you respect, and ignore the rest.

- Whenever you do a mitzvah, stop and be mindful. Every mitzvah is there to teach us something, and it makes all the difference to pause and remember why. Mindless Judaism is not good for the soul.

- When you daven, reflect carefully on the meaning of the words. Remember too that in davening we are part of a four-thousand-year-old choral symphony, made up of the voices of all the Jews of all the countries in all the centuries who said these words. Some said these prayers in the midst of suffering; others as they faced exile and expulsion; some even said them in the concentration camps. They are words sanctified by tears, but now we are saying them in the midst of freedom. The prayers of our ancestors have come true for us. Therefore our
prayers honour them as well as God, for without them we would not today be Jews, and without us carrying on their tradition, their hopes would have been in vain.

► Don’t worry if you can’t keep up with the congregation. One word said from the heart is greater than a hundred said without understanding or attention.

► Always be willing to share your Judaism. On Shabbat or the festivals, invite guests into your home. Once a week, learn with people who know less than you. The difference between material and spiritual goods is this: with material things – like wealth or power – the more you share, the less you have. With spiritual things – like knowledge or friendship or celebration – the more you share, the more you have.

► Never be impatient with the details of Jewish life. *God lives in the details.* Judaism is about the poetry of the ordinary, the things we would otherwise take for granted. Jewish law is the sacred choreography of everyday life.

► God lives in the space we make for him. Every *mitzvah* we do, every prayer we say, every act
of learning we undertake, is a way of making space for God.
Finding Happiness

SARA, DAVID, not everything in the coming year will be under our control. It never is. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...” The book is being written now but we don’t get to read it in advance. Even in the twenty-first century, when human beings have decoded the genome and photographed the birth of galaxies, there is one thing not even the greatest Nobel prize-winning scientist knows: what tomorrow will bring. We live with uncertainty.

That is the human condition and always will be. But what matters will be under our control. How will we act and react? Will we behave honourably, graciously, generously? Will we help others? Will we make sacrifices for the sake of our ideals? Will we live for something bigger than the self? Will we honour, praise, respect, admire? Will we give hospitality to the lonely, comfort to the bereaved, and support to those in need? Will we
Letters to the Next Generation

give our family time? Will we give our soul the space to breathe? Will we love and thank God? Will we enhance other people’s lives?

These are the questions we should ask ourselves on Yom Kippur. For it is not what happens to us on which our happiness depends. It depends on how we respond to what happens to us. So in this, my last letter to you before Yom Kippur, let me share with you ten secrets I’ve learned from Judaism. They will bring you happiness whatever fate has in store for you in the coming year.

1. Give thanks. Once a day, at the beginning of the morning prayers, thank God for all He has given you. This alone will bring you halfway to happiness. We already have most of the ingredients of a happy life. It’s just that we tend to take these for granted and concentrate instead on our unfulfilled desires. Giving thanks in prayer focuses attention on the good and helps us keep a sense of proportion about the rest. It’s better than shopping – and cheaper too.

2. Praise. Catch someone doing something right and say so. Most people, most of the time, are unappreciated. Being recognised, thanked and congratulated by someone else is one of the most empow-
eraring things that can happen to us. So don’t wait for someone to do it for you: do it for someone else. You will make their day, and that will help make yours. *Alenu leshabe’ach* means, “It’s our duty to praise”.

3. **Spend time with your family.** Keep Shabbat, so that there is at least one time a week when you sit down to have a meal together with no distractions – no television, no phone, no email, just being together, talking together, celebrating one another’s company. Happy marriages and families need dedicated time.

4. **Discover meaning.** Take time, once in a while, to ask the Yom Kippur questions, “Why am I here? What do I hope to achieve? How best can I use my gifts? What would I wish to be said about me when I am no longer here?” Finding meaning is essential to a fulfilled life – and how will you find it if you never look? If you don’t know where you want to be, you will never get there however fast you run.

5. **Live your values.** Most of us believe in high ideals, but we act on them only sporadically. The best thing to do is to establish habits that get us to enact those ideals daily. That is what *mitzvot* are: ideals in action, constantly rehearsed.
6. *Forgive*. This is the emotional equivalent of losing excess weight. Life is too short to bear a grudge or seek revenge. Forgiving someone is good for them but even better for you. The bad has happened. It won’t be made better by your dwelling on it. Let it go. Move on.

7. *Keep growing*. Don’t stand still, especially in the life of the spirit. The Jewish way to change the world is to start with yourself. Anne Frank once wrote: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world”.

8. *Learn to listen*. Often in conversation we spend half our time thinking of what we want to say next instead of paying attention to what the other person is saying. Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give to someone else. It means that we are open to them, that we take them seriously, that we accept graciously their gift of words. The keyword in Judaism is *Shema*, which simply means “Listen”.

9. *Create moments of silence in the soul*. Liberate yourself, if only five minutes daily, from the tyranny of technology, the mobile phone, the laptop and all the other electronic intruders. Remember that God is in every breath we breathe. Inhale the heady air of existence, and feel the joy of being.
10. *Transform suffering*. When bad things happen to you, use them to sensitise you to the pain of others. The people who survived tragedy and became stronger as a result did not ask, “Who did this to me?” They asked, “What does this allow me to do that I could not have done before?” They didn’t curse the darkness; instead they lit a candle. They refused to become victims of circumstance. They became, instead, agents of hope.

Life’s too full of blessings to waste time and attention on artificial substitutes. Live, give, forgive, celebrate and praise: these are still the best ways of making a blessing over life, thereby turning life into a blessing.

Sara, David, our beloved children: you will never know how many blessings you have given your mother and me. The best we can give you is to pray that God help you to be a blessing to others. Be the best you can, be an ambassador for Judaism and the Jewish people, use each day to do something demanding, and never be afraid to learn and grow. We love you. May God write you and your children in the Book of Life.
Part Two

To Ruth and Michael...
RUTH, MICHAEL, did you ever hear the story, about Alfred Nobel, the man who created the prizes that bear his name? In 1888, Nobel, the man who invented dynamite, was reading his morning papers when, with a shock, he found himself reading his own obituary. It turned out that a journalist had made a simple mistake. It was Nobel’s brother who had died.

What horrified Nobel was what he read. It spoke about “the dynamite king” who had made a fortune from explosives. Nobel suddenly realised that if he didn’t change his life that was all he would be remembered for. At that moment he decided to dedicate his fortune to creating five annual prizes for those who’d made outstanding contributions in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace. Nobel chose to be remembered for peace.
What will we be remembered for? That is the question Judaism makes us confront, especially on Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. Let me tell you a true story, tragic but also deeply inspiring. It happened in the summer of 2010. A young man, Marc Weinberg, brilliant, gifted, with a devoted wife and two beautiful young children, had been diagnosed with leukaemia. For two and a half years, helped by advanced medical technology and lifted by the prayers of friends, he fought with all his strength against the civil war raging inside his body. In the end it was too much, and he died, still in his mid-thirties.

Marc was no ordinary young man. He was a person of the most profound religious belief and practice, who spent every spare moment of his crowded, short life helping others and bringing out the best in them. By the sheer force of his example he transformed lives. He taught people the power of possibility and helped them become better than they thought they were.

Was this his reward? To die so young? Abraham once asked, “Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?” There are moments that can shake your faith to its foundations. Yet, as I stood at his funeral, this was not the feeling that swept over me. Instead I felt a strange, quite unexpected access of faith.
For around me, gathered at short notice, were more than a thousand mourners, many of them his age or younger. Through their tears I saw the difference he had made to their lives. He wasn’t rich or famous. He had lived all too briefly. Yet each of them had a story to tell of how he had helped them, inspired them, befriended them when they were lonely, lifted them when they were suffering some personal crisis. Each of those blessings had given rise to others in turn, in a series of ever-widening ripples of good.

There is a film, *Pay It Forward*, in which the hero, a young schoolboy, is set an assignment by his social science teacher. “Come up with a practical plan to change the world and improve humankind.” Moved by the plight of people he sees in difficulties – a homeless man, his alcoholic mother, his badly scarred teacher – he suddenly envisages a way. Normally, kindnesses are reciprocated. They are “paid back.” What if they were paid forward? What if we made it a condition of doing someone some good, that they agreed to do good to someone else in need? Could you not make virtue contagious, creating an epidemiology of generosity?

The film ends on a note of tragedy. The child dies. But the story is a tutorial in hope, because the child does succeed in changing lives in ways no one could
have foreseen. That is what I felt among the crowd of mourners that day. We had come to honour the memory of one who, without ever saying so, taught people to pay it forward, and he had left behind him a vast legacy of blessings. And yes, he died young and left a tidal wave of grief. But he had also taught us how never to let grief, or suffering, or sadness have the last word. Before he died, he taught us how to live.

We wept that day. I believe God wept too. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel prize winning writer, once speculated that Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, is 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. We knew, that day, that we had known one of them.

Ruth, Michael, none of us knows how long we will live. We just know that one day we will die. Life is too short to waste on “the small stuff.” Judaism teaches us the simplest, deepest truth of all. You make a blessing over life by being a blessing to those whose lives you touch.
RUTH, MICHAEL, it is often easier to understand how Judaism can make a difference at home, or in synagogue, or among friends. But sometimes it is possible to overlook how it will help you to do the right and the good as you pursue your career. Unfortunately, we live in a time when we’ve been shaken by scandals involving bankers and financiers, politicians and parliamentarians, journalists and the police. They have acted in ways at worst immoral, at best irresponsible.

We now know we can’t take morality for granted. Even people in positions of trust can betray that trust. We also know why. Not because they are evil, but because they have creative consciences: “If everyone else is doing it, why shouldn’t I? Who will notice? Besides which, it’s a brutal, competitive, beat-or-be-beaten world. And strictly speaking, it’s legal. Even if it isn’t, I can hire a lawyer who will argue it is. The gain is
great, the downside small.” That’s how intelligent people come to do foolish things.

*If you want to be protected against doing foolish things, be guided by a wisdom higher than your own and older than your contemporaries.* When it comes to moral wisdom, there is no tradition stronger than Judaism.

The voice of Torah is the moral voice of Western civilisation. It says: Love your neighbour as yourself. It says: Love the stranger for you were once strangers. It says: Justice, justice shall you pursue. It says: Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

Listen to these words from the Haftarah of Yom Kippur, taken from the book of Isaiah: “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”
Who else speaks this way? Not the Egyptians or Babylonians, the ancient Greeks or Romans, not Descartes or Kant or Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. Albert Einstein spoke about the “almost fanatical love of justice” that made him “thank his stars” that he belonged to the Jewish tradition. Jews added something, an inflection, an accent, an urgency and passion, to the moral voice of humankind.

Of course Jews don’t have a monopoly on conscience or virtue. We don’t claim to have. We believe, as Rabbenu Nissim Gerondi (1180–1263) says in the introduction to his commentary on the Talmud, that the moral commands have been binding since the first humans set foot on earth. Humans, as evolutionary psychologists have been proving, have a moral sense. It’s what makes us social animals.

But let me be blunt. Whatever you choose to do, there will be times when you will be tempted – to cut corners, take advantage of your situation, bend the rules to your own advantage, use privileged access or insider information, or do something you know you should not do but which other people seem to be getting away with. There is no life without temptation.

That is when all the habits of the heart that Judaism inculcates make a difference: the prayers we say, the
Torah we learned, the stories we heard as children, the standards we know are expected of us, even the mere knowledge that, though no one else may know what we are doing, God knows, and God is the voice of conscience in the human heart.

This matters more than I can say. When I think of the people who had such gifts, such talents, such promising careers, who were so well thought of – and then, because of a moment’s temptation, the prospect of a quick profit, an easy gain, they put it all at risk – then I thank God for whispering the word that is always the hardest to hear. The word “No.”

Ruth, Michael, believe me: If the only thing Judaism does for us in a lifetime is to keep us from temptation, it would still be worth all the money in the world.
Letter 9

Faith

RUTH, MICHAEL, consider this: To explain the universe we no longer need Genesis; we have science. To control the universe we no longer need prayer; we have technology. To prevent the abuse of power we don’t need prophets; we have elections. To achieve prosperity we don’t need blessings; we have economists.

If we fall ill we don’t go to a rabbi; we go to a doctor. If we feel guilty we no longer need confession; we can go to a psychotherapist. If we are depressed we no longer need the book of Psalms; we can take Prozac. And if we seek salvation we can go to a shopping centre where we can buy happiness at a highly competitive price. So who needs religion?

Yet religion survives. Everywhere except Europe, it’s getting stronger. Today in the United States – still the world’s leading economy – more people regularly attend a place of worship than they do in the theocrat-
ic state of Iran. In China, the world’s fastest growing economy, there are more people in church on a Sunday than there are members of the Communist Party, and this in a place that, a half-century ago, Chairman Mao Zedong declared “religion-free.”

If religion has been declared dying, even dead, why is it still so vigorously alive? Because none of the institutions of the modern world – science, technology, liberal democracy and the market economy – can answer the three great questions that every reflective human being must ask:

▶ Who am I?
▶ Why am I here?
▶ How then shall I live?

Science deals with causes, not purposes. It tells us how, not why. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use that power. Liberal democracy gives us maximal space to live in accordance with our conscience but does not presume to be that conscience. The market gives us choices but does not tell us how to choose.

Yet we seek an answer to those questions, and that is not a minor fact about us. It is constitutive of our
Faith

humanity. Homo sapiens is the meaning-seeking animal. That is why religion survives and always will. To put it as simply as possible: Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. These are different activities, and we need “the great partnership” of both. Judaism respects science, so much so that two thousand years ago the sages coined a special blessing to be said “on seeing one of the sages of the nations of the world,” meaning what we would nowadays call scientists. Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century said that science and metaphysics are ways of achieving the love and fear of God.

But science is only half the story. It can analyse the chemical composition of a great painting but it cannot tell us what makes it a great painting. It can tell us how our instinctual drives were formed but it cannot tell us which of those drives to yield to and which to resist. It can measure the cosmic microwave background radiation that in 1964 enabled American physicists Penzias and Wilson to prove that the universe had an origin in time. But it cannot tell us what existed before or exists beyond the universe.

Who are we? Why are we here? How then should we live? Those are the questions to answer for which we need faith, and they will continue to be asked as
Letters to the Next Generation

long are there are humans on earth. Faith is the answer to the questions that will remain even when all the science has been done.
RUTH, MICHAEL, today there are a plethora of religions to choose from. So what is it that makes Judaism different and unique? One answer was given by Jeremiah in a line we say on Rosh Hashanah: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the wilderness, through an unsown land.”

Jews were the people willing to travel toward the unknown. Judaism began with two epic journeys, one by Abraham and Sarah, the other in the days of Moses. And note that both journeys were in exactly the opposite direction to the one we would expect. Normally people travel toward centres of civilisation. Abraham and Moses travelled away from the greatest civilisations of their day. Jews are akshanim, obstinate, counter-cultural. If the rest of the world is going one way, Jews go the other. They take what American poet Robert Frost called “the road less travelled.”
So when people worshipped power, Jews stood up for the powerless. When societies were rigidly hierarchal, Jews taught that we each have equal dignity. When 90% of Europe was illiterate, Jews built schools to ensure that each of their children had an education. When the vast majority of humanity lived in poverty, Jews practised the principle of tzedakah, the duty of those who have more than they need to share with those who have less.

Judaism is the counter-voice in the human conversation. To be a Jew is to be an iconoclast, challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions of our time, willing to break the idols of the age.

Jews pioneered time and again. To quote Paul Johnson again, to the Jews “we owe the idea of equality before the law, both Divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind.”

But the foundational discovery that led to all the others was the idea of a God not within nature but beyond it, a God therefore who could not be seen but
could none the less be heard, a God who, transcending the physical universe, summons us to transcend the purely physical universe of human desires and reflexes that have, throughout the ages, led people to violence, cruelty and injustice.

Jews were different. We still are. Unlike atheists, we believe that the universe, and human life, have a purpose. Unlike Christians and Muslims we believe that you don’t have to belong to our religion to have a relationship with God or a place in heaven. Judaism doesn’t believe that humans are tainted by original sin. It is a religion of questions and arguments: we don’t believe that the highest state is blind obedience, silencing the intellect God gave us when He made us in His image.

Unlike today’s secularists, we don’t believe that morality is relative, or that marriage is just one lifestyle choice among many, or that there can be rights without responsibilities. And unlike today’s materialists, we don’t believe that human beings are just accidental configurations of selfish genes, that our noblest thoughts are no more than electrical impulses in the brain, and that our dreams, hopes, visions and aspirations are mere illusions and self-deceptions.
Jews were different. They still are different. Judaism is about the dignity of difference. Throughout history Jews were the only people who consistently refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the majority faith. Jews were often a minority to teach the world that God cares about the rights of minorities. And to teach all of us that the majority is not always right, nor is the conventional wisdom always wise. That has meant that we have often been disliked. People hate to see their prejudices disturbed. But the world needs its dissenting voices – and that is what we are.
RUTH, MICHAEL, bear with me because I want to explain one of the most difficult, revolutionary ideas of Judaism – something still not well understood but which is absolutely fundamental to our view of the world.

Judaism is a religion of what one writer called “sacred discontent.” That is one of the most difficult and revolutionary ideas in Judaism, and something that is still not well understood but which is absolutely fundamental to our view of the world. So I want to share an idea with you which might help us to understand it better.

There’s an ancient Midrash – a rabbinical commentary dating back some fifteen centuries. It is asking the question, what made Abraham begin his religious quest? The answer it gives is very strange indeed.

It says that he was like a man on a journey in some remote place when he sees in the distance a palace in
flames. He asks, Can the palace be without an owner? While he is puzzling about this, he hears a voice coming from the burning building saying, “I am the owner of the palace.” So Abraham heard God saying, “I am the owner of the world.”

This is a haunting story. Let’s figure out what it means. Abraham is saying, the palace must have an owner. Someone designed this building, and had it built. Palaces don’t suddenly appear of their own accord. And the owner, or at least someone working for him, must be there now, because you don’t abandon a palace or leave it unattended. In which case, why is it burning? Somebody should be putting out the flames.

I have never heard a more profound and unsettling account of the nature of the universe. We believe that it is like a palace. Someone designed it. Someone built it. Someone therefore owns it. As I wrote before, the more we understand of how finely tuned the universe is for the emergence of stars, planets and life, the less likely it is that it simply appeared by spontaneous self-generation. Someone made the universe that gave rise to us.

In which case, why is there so much evil and suffering and injustice and cruelty and violence and terror and disease and needless death? The universe is a
contradiction. On the one hand, order, on the other, chaos. On the one hand, the palace, on the other, the flames.

Abraham lived, and we live, with that contradiction. And as the Midrash indicates, there is only one way out. God is calling us, as He called Abraham: “Help Me put out the flames.”

Why can’t God do it Himself? If He can create an entire universe, why can’t He eliminate evil and suffering and disease without our help? Because some of the evil is because He gave humans freewill, and He can’t take away that freedom without taking away our humanity. And because only if there is deterioration and decay can there be a physical universe capable of giving rise to life at all.

We are the dust of exploded stars, so scientists tell us. So, without the explosions there would be no us. Without illness there would be no death and without death there would be no new life. If people lived for ever they would have no grandchildren, and again there would be no us. God can do everything but the impossible. And it is impossible to have a physical universe and life – cosmology and biology – without decay and disaster and death. This is the one palace that cannot exist without the flames.
And we have to help God put them out. This is what Judaism means when it says that God asks us to be His partners in the work of creation. No other religion and no secular philosophy has thought in these terms. “Sacred discontent” is the most radical contribution Judaism made to the civilisation of the West, and it is very challenging, very distinctive.

Which is, I suspect, why so many Jews became doctors fighting disease, or lawyers fighting injustice, or economists fighting poverty, or teachers fighting ignorance, or campaigners fighting intolerance and oppression. Jews don’t accept the world. We try to mend the world, knowing how deeply it is fractured. That too is why I am proud to be a Jew.
RUTH, MICHAEL, prayer is a central element of being Jewish, but it would be wrong to think of prayer as a way of changing God’s mind. In fact, it can’t be that, for an obvious reason. Let us suppose I pray for something. Either it is good that this happens, or it is not. If it is, then God does not need my prayer to make it happen. He will make it happen anyway because it is good and God is good. If it isn’t good, then God will not bring it about, however hard I pray.

The proof is none other than Moses. When Moses prayed for God to forgive the Israelites, God forgave them because God forgives. But when he prayed that he, Moses, be allowed to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, God did not grant him his request. He told him to stop praying. It was not going to happen however hard or long Moses prayed. So prayer does not change God’s mind in any simple sense.
Prayer changes the world because it changes us. The Hebrew word for “to pray” is lehitpallel, which means “to judge yourself.” That is what we do when we pray. We pray not simply for God to fulfil our desires but in order to know what to desire. All animals act to satisfy their desires. Only human beings are capable of standing back and passing judgment on their desires. There are some desires we should not satisfy. Junk food is bad for us. So is smoking. So are many drugs. So is wealth illicitly obtained. So is ambition achieved by betraying others. And so on. To be humanly mature is to know what to desire.

Prayer is the education of desire. Take the weekday Amidah as an example: It teaches us to seek knowledge, wisdom and understanding – not just a new car, an exotic holiday, or expensive clothes. It teaches us to want to return to God when, as happens so often, we drift in the winds of time, blown this way and that by the pressures of today. It teaches us to seek spiritual healing as well as physical health. It teaches us to seek the best not just for ourselves but also for our people and ultimately for all humanity.

In Birkat ha-shachar, the Dawn Blessings, prayer opens our eyes to the wonders of the physical world. It trains us to give thanks for the sheer gift of being alive.
Prayer

In *Pesukei de-zimra*, the Verses of Praise, we learn to see the Creator through creation. We sense the song of the earth in the wind that moves the trees, the clouds that dapple the sky, the sun that melts the snow. We hear God’s praise in the breath of all that lives.

In the *Shema* we cover our eyes to move inward to the world of sound, to listen to the voice of God that we can only hear in the silence of the soul. And the word we hear is love – our love for God, His love for us. Then in the *Amidah* we stand in God’s presence, take three steps forward and bow. *Lehavdil* – which means, we are implying no comparison – it’s like the feeling people have when they meet the Queen. You know you are in the presence of majesty. That’s what a Jew feels – any Jew, any day – when he or she begins the “Standing Prayer.”

Prayer teaches us to give thanks. There’s a famous and fascinating piece of medical research known as the Nuns’ Study. A group of nuns in America gave permission for their way of life to be studied in the interests of medical science. What the researchers found, comparing the nuns now with the brief autobiographies they had written sixty years before on entering the order, is that those who at the age of twenty expressed the most gratitude, lived longer and suffered fewer
illnesses than their less appreciative counterparts. Giving thanks – in Hebrew, Modim anachnu lakh – generates spiritual happiness which in turn helps physical health.

Above all, prayer tells us we are not alone in the world. When Natan (then Anatoly) Sharansky was imprisoned by the KGB, his wife Avital gave him a little Hebrew book of Psalms. The KGB sensed it would give him strength, so they confiscated it. He fought a three-year campaign to have it returned, and eventually it was.

Natan’s knowledge of Hebrew was limited, but he was a brilliant mathematician, so he acted as if the book was written in a code he had to decipher. Slowly he decoded it, word by word, until he came to a complete sentence that came to him as a revelation, as if it had been spoken specifically to him there in the Russian prison. It was a line from Psalm 23: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me.” Many years later he took one of these phrases as the title of his autobiography: Fear no evil. To pray is to know that “You are with me.” It is to know we are not alone.

Without a vessel to contain a blessing, there can be no blessing. If we have no receptacle to catch the rain,
Prayer

the rain may fall, but we will have none to drink. If we have no radio receiver, the sound waves will flow, but we will be unable to convert them into sound. God’s blessings flow continuously, but unless we make ourselves into a vessel for them, they will flow elsewhere. Prayer is the act of turning ourselves into a vehicle for the Divine.

Prayer is to the soul what exercise is to the body. You can live without exercise but it will not be a healthy life. You can live without prayer, but whole areas of human experience will be closed to you. Prayer changes the world because it changes us, opening our eyes to the radiance of God’s world, our ears to the still small voice of God’s word.
RUTH, MICHAEL, one of the things I value most about Judaism is how the 613 commandments – or mitzvot – provide us with a powerful framework that can help shape how we live our lives.

A few years ago, there was a spate of books from Malcolm Gladwell’s Outliers to Matthew Syed’s Bounce, and others, on what makes great people great. What is it that some have and the rest of us don’t, whether in sport, literature, music or science?

It’s a key question and there are some fascinating stories on the way to an answer. Syed, for example, tells us that there was once a street in Reading, a town in Britain, that contained more young table tennis champions than the rest of Britain put together. He should know. He was one of them.

Then there was the Hungarian Laszlo Polgar who decided, even before getting married, that his children...
would become chess champions. Eventually he had three daughters and they did all become chess-playing stars.

Clearly, then, genius can’t all be in the genes. There is no reason to suppose that a table tennis gene suddenly appeared at a particular time and place in Reading. The answer turns out to be the neuroscientific equivalent of the old joke. A tourist stops a taxi driver and asks how you get to the Royal Festival Hall. The taxi driver replies: “Practise, lady, practise.”

Which is what champions do. They simply put in more hours than anyone else. The magic number is 10,000 hours. That – roughly ten years of “deep practice” – is what it takes to reach the top in almost every field.

Even Mozart, the classic example of a child prodigy, turns out to confirm the rule. Mozart’s father Leopold was a considerable musician himself, as well as a dominating parent who forced young Wolfgang Amadeus to practise music constantly from the age of three. Although he achieved brilliance as a performer by the age of six, it was not until his early twenties that he was composing works of genius.

What is new in all this is our understanding of the neuroscience involved. Each new skill reconfigures the brain, creating new neural pathways. It seems that a
substance in the brain known as myelin, whose function was previously not well understood, wraps itself around these pathways, making the connections speedier the more they are used.

The result is that practice makes certain responses immediate and intuitive, bypassing the slow, deliberative circuits in the brain. That accounts for the speed with which a Novak Djokovic or a Roger Federer can deliver a blinding return of serve. The more you practise the less need you have for conscious thought. That’s why after years of driving we no longer need to think about gear changes the way we did when we were still learners.

None of these authors, as far as I know, has applied their findings to religion, but they have huge implications for the very thing you asked about: ritual.

People tend to think that what differentiates religious people from their secular counterparts is that they believe different things. But that is less than half the story. Religious people behave distinctively. They engage in ritual. They do certain things like praying, over and over again. Ritual is the religious equivalent of “deep practice.” All great achievement requires ritual.

We now understand why. Constant practice creates new neural pathways. It makes certain forms of
behaviour instinctive. It reconfigures our character so that we are no longer the people we once were. We have, engraved into our instincts the way certain strokes are engraved in the minds of tennis champions, specific responses to circumstance. Ritual changes the world by changing us.

That, wrote Moses Maimonides, is the purpose of “most of the commandments.” Repetition creates deeply embedded habits. Prayer engenders gratitude. Daily charitable giving makes us generous. Each of Judaism’s “thou shalt nots” teaches us self-control. Even Sigmund Freud, not a fan of religion, recognised the power of Judaism to create the habits of “instinctual renunciation” that he saw as the basis of morality and society.

Far from being outmoded, religious ritual turns out to be deeply in tune with the new neuroscience of human talent, personality and the plasticity of the brain. Judaism never forgot what science is helping us rediscover: that ritual creates new habits of the heart that can lift us to unexpected greatness.
RUTH, MICHAEL, one of the great lines of our prayers – it comes from Psalm 90 – says, “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” As Steve Jobs once said, “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life.” Don’t try to be what you aren’t. Try to be what you are called on to be.

I have seen people achieve great success and yet end their lives sad and lonely because they thought about themselves and never really cared for others. I have seen people with great talent underachieve because they never fully realised that character matters more than talent, and wisdom more than being clever. I have seen people accumulate great wealth without finding happiness because they forgot that wealth is only a means, not an end. Happiness is made by the good we do, the relationships we form, and the extent to which we enhance the lives of others.
There is massive research evidence that people who are religious are happier, healthier and live longer than others – not always; there are many exceptions; but on average. It’s obvious why. Religion encourages us to sustain marriages, strengthen families, become part of a community and do good to others by giving, tzedakah, or volunteering, chessed. Faith endows our life with meaning.

I do not mean to criticise anyone who chooses otherwise, nor to suggest that religious people are any less prone than others to the “thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” But I have found that faith has helped me and many others I know to survive crisis, avoid temptation, live for the things that matter, and work daily to mend the faults I know I have and the mistakes I know I make. Faith speaks to the better angels of our nature.

It makes a difference to keep Shabbat and know that, yes, work is important, but there are limits. Society forgets those limits. It treats employees and professionals as if they were permanently on call, ready to respond 24/7 to emails and phone calls. It forgets that there are limits to our consumption and our pursuit of desire. The sages asked, why is God called Shaddai (one of the names of God in the Torah)? They answered,
“Because He said to the world, Dai, enough.” There are times when we have to say to the world, “Enough,” when we don’t work or spend or answer the phone but instead enjoy our family, celebrate community, and thank God for His blessings.

It makes a difference to daven, to pray, to be in regular touch with the Presence at the heart of being, to give voice to our hopes, thanks for our lives and expression to our emotions, joining our voice to the choral symphony of our people as it sings its song of praise to God.

It makes a difference to have days like Yom Kippur when we can acknowledge our shortcomings, make amends for our failures, apologise and know we are forgiven.

It makes a difference to share a faith and a tradition with your children and know that what you live for will live on – that you are in fact part of the longest and most remarkable story ever written by one nation since man first set foot on earth.

In the end a life must have meaning, and we can never find meaning in isolation. Think of a letter in the alphabet. All meaning is expressed in words and all words are made of letters. But no letter has meaning on its own. To have meaning it must be joined
to others to make words, sentences, paragraphs and stories. The same is true of lives. No life has meaning on its own. It must be joined to other lives in families, communities, peoples and their histories. Our individualistic age often forgets this but Judaism never does.

And yes, bad things are happening in the world today, but the good things outweigh them. Yes, Israel is criticised, even isolated, but at least we have an Israel – a land, a home, a state, a society – after two thousand years of exile.

Yes, there is antisemitism. But there is much philosemitism also. Jews and Judaism are respected as perhaps never before. Recent research in the United States, for example, showed that Americans feel more warmly toward Jews than they do toward the members of any other religious group.

And yes, Jewish life is not always as consistently inspiring as we would wish it to be. The way to change that is to get involved and make it better.

Throughout my life I have met Jews of all kinds throughout the world. And if I have noticed one thing it is that Jews seem somehow more vivid, more energetic and passionate, hungrier for life, than most others.
The reason is not that Jews are different. It’s that Judaism is different.

Jews found God in life – not in a distant heaven or the world to come or a monastic retreat or a world-denying asceticism. God, said Moses, is not distant but close. Forgive the expression, but Jews always treated God – and by the evidence of the Torah He has treated us – as if we were close relatives, part of the mishpacha. Perhaps that’s why we so often argued with Him, and He with us. But relatives are inseparable. You can argue with a member of the family but they remain a member of the family. In Judaism, God is near. The bond between us is unbreakable.

God is close. God is here. God is life. Therefore celebrate life. Sanctify life. Turn life into a blessing and make a blessing over life. That is Judaism in 25 words.

I promise you that whatever you choose to do, living a Jewish life will help you do it better, with greater balance, more wisdom, more joy, a deeper sense of purpose and a feeling of having been touched by eternity.

Ruth, Michael, may the God of life write you in the book of life, and may your life become a blessed chapter in His book.
Why I Am a Jew
Why I am a Jew

SARA AND DAVID, RUTH AND MICHAEL, the deepest question any of us can ask is: Who am I? To answer it we have to go deeper than, Where do I live? or What do I do? The most fateful moment in my life came when I asked myself that question and knew the answer had to be: I am a Jew. This is why.

I am a Jew not because I believe that Judaism contains all there is of the human story. I admire other traditions and their contributions to the world. Nor am I a Jew because of antisemitism or anti-Zionism. What happens to me does not define who I am: ours is a people of faith, not fate. Nor is it because I think that Jews are better than others, more intelligent, creative, generous or successful. It’s not Jews who are different, but Judaism. It’s not so much what we are but what we are called on to be.

I am a Jew because, being a child of my people, I have heard the call to add my chapter to its unfinished
Why I am a Jew

story. I am a stage on its journey, a connecting link between the generations. The dreams and hopes of my ancestors live on in me, and I am the guardian of their trust, now and for the future.

I am a Jew because our ancestors were the first to see that the world is driven by a moral purpose, that reality is not a ceaseless war of the elements, to be worshipped as gods, nor history a battle in which might is right and power is to be appeased. The Judaic tradition shaped the moral civilisation of the West, teaching for the first time that human life is sacred, that the individual may never be sacrificed for the mass, and that rich and poor, great and small, are all equal before God.

I am a Jew because I am the moral heir of those who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and pledged themselves to live by these truths for all time. I am the descendant of countless generations of ancestors who, though sorely tested and bitterly tried, remained faithful to that covenant when they might so easily have defected.

I am a Jew because of Shabbat, the world’s greatest religious institution, a time in which there is no manipulation of nature or our fellow human beings, in which we come together in freedom and equality to
create, every week, an anticipation of the messianic age.

I am a Jew because our nation, though at times it suffered the deepest poverty, never gave up on its commitment to helping the poor, or rescuing Jews from other lands, or fighting for justice for the oppressed, and did so without self-congratulation, because it was a mitzvah, because a Jew could do no less.

I am a Jew because I cherish the Torah, knowing that God is to be found not just in natural forces but in moral meanings, in words, texts, teachings and commands, and because Jews, though they lacked all else, never ceased to value education as a sacred task, endowing the individual with dignity and depth.

I am a Jew because of our people’s passionate faith in freedom, holding that each of us is a moral agent, and that in this lies our unique dignity as human beings; and because Judaism never left its ideals at the level of lofty aspirations, but instead translated them into deeds which we call mitzvot, and a way, which we call the halakhah, and thus brought heaven down to earth.

I am proud, simply, to be a Jew.

I am proud to be part of a people who, though scarred and traumatised, never lost their humour or
their faith, their ability to laugh at present troubles and still believe in ultimate redemption; who saw human history as a journey, and never stopped travelling and searching.

I am proud to be part of an age in which my people, ravaged by the worst crime ever to be committed against a people, responded by reviving a land, recovering their sovereignty, rescuing threatened Jews throughout the world, rebuilding Jerusalem, and proving themselves to be as courageous in the pursuit of peace as in defending themselves in war.

I am proud that our ancestors refused to be satisfied with premature consolations, and in answer to the question, “Has the Messiah come?” always answered, “Not yet.”

I am proud to belong to the people Israel, whose name means “one who wrestles with God and with man and prevails.” For though we have loved humanity, we have never stopped wrestling with it, challenging the idols of every age. And though we have loved God with an everlasting love, we have never stopped wrestling with Him nor He with us.

I admire other civilisations and traditions and believe each has brought something special into the world, Aval zeh shelanu, “but this is ours.” This is my
people, my heritage, my faith. In our uniqueness lies our universality. Through being what we alone are, we give to humanity what only we can give.

This, then, is our story, our gift to the next generation. I received it from my parents and they from theirs across great expanses of space and time. There is nothing quite like it. It changed and still challenges the moral imagination of mankind.

I want to say to you and Jews around the world: Take it, cherish it, learn to understand and to love it. Carry it and it will carry you. And may you in turn pass it on to future generations. For you are a member of an eternal people, a letter in their scroll. Let their eternity live on in you.
The front cover illustration is “Abraham Sarah and Yitzhak” by Yoram Raanan.

Yoram Raanan graduated from the University of Arts, Philadelphia (BFA 1975). He travelled and studied independently throughout Europe and the Near East. In 1976 he settled in Israel and opened his first studio in the Bukharim Quarter in Jerusalem. Since 1994, he has been creating art on his farm in the Judean hills of the Jerusalem Corridor. He is married and has 4 children and grandchildren.

Raanan’s paintings are a modern expression of Jewish collective consciousness. Characterised by intuition and imagination, there is a strong sense of light, colour and spirituality. He is inspired by the Bible, nature and the Land of Israel.

In this painting entitled “Abraham Sarah and Yitzhak”, although Abraham and Sarah seem to share the same body, the figure of Sarah is of strong stature. Abraham appears to be subduing himself before her reflecting the verse in Genesis in which God tells Abraham that “whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice” (21:12). The three figures form an axis, as the spirit and purity of faith is transmitted in a primal and pristine setting. The colours are subtle, with red dominating as a symbol of the vitality and strength of Jewish values and family.

It is reproduced courtesy of Yoram Raanan. You can view or purchase his work at www.yoramraanan.com. You can follow him on Facebook and Instagram @RaananArt.