

JUDAISM'S LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS  
A WEEKLY READING OF THE JEWISH BIBLE



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

**JUDAISM'S  
LIFE-CHANGING  
IDEAS**

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

The Phillips Family Edition

Maggid Books & OU Press

*The Phillips family are delighted  
to support the work of Rabbi Sacks.*

London, September 2020, תשד׳ תשפ״א

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*Foreword*

# The Secret of Our Staying Power

Bari Weiss\*

I sit here typing these words down the street from a school for young Israelites in Pittsburgh. Or, as we now call them, Jews.

There are no schools for Amalekites or Moabites on planet Earth. The Roman Empire that destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem is long gone. And yet here, speaking in the language of King David, there are Jews.

“Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite, even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people? When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event

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\* Bari Weiss is an op-ed editor and writer at the *New York Times*. She was previously senior editor at *Tablet* magazine and book review editor at the *Wall Street Journal*. Ms. Weiss's first book, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, won a 2019 National Jewish Book Award.

remarkable,” noted the late Southern American Catholic writer Walker Percy. “What are they doing here?”

By every rule of history we should have disappeared long ago, a civilization only capable of being recalled, like those others, on Wikipedia. But we are here, in all those places Percy named and more. It seems to me that our very existence is an earthly miracle more astonishing than the parting of the Red Sea.

What are we doing here? Not just here, against all odds, but here still asking the eternal questions that gave us the name Yisrael in the first place?

I don’t know the answer. I am no scholar, unlike the brilliant author of this volume. I am just a simple Jew.

But it doesn’t take a genius to see that the secret is not our superhuman physical strength. Nor is it our ability to organize, or to wield political power. No, I believe the secret of our staying power is the subject of this volume: our ideas.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks shows in these soul-nourishing essays, those ideas – one God, freedom, Shabbat, the dignity of difference, the preciousness of human life – have not just sustained our desert-born tribe. They have also transformed the world.

These days, there is understandable cynicism about that very notion. But if I didn’t believe that ideas have the power to change the world I would be in the wrong business, as a writer and editor of opinion columns. Indeed, one of the ideas that changed the way I live my own life was uttered by Rabbi Sacks, and its insight hit me right in the heart of a newsroom.

That idea? Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism.

I bore witness to the wisdom of that lesson when I was a young editor at the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page. It was a heady place to work and I was eager to fit in.

So when the good people from Chabad showed up bearing *sufganiyot* at Hanukkah time, I was less than thrilled.

Why did my fellow Jews need to show up in their beards and black hats with boxes of high-caloric food with weird names in front of all of my staid, salad-eating colleagues? Chabad does amazing work. But did they really have to do it here, at my fancy newspaper job?

The shame hit me when I saw the reaction of my non-Jewish colleagues. Everyone loved them. The treats, sure, but more so the warmth and curiosity of the Chabadniks who would become my friends.

It's not just that non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. That experience, and countless others that followed, taught me the unspoken part of Rabbi Sacks's teaching: Jews who respect Judaism respect themselves.

It was a reminder to me at the precise moment I needed it that my Jewishness is never, ever an obstacle to connection to people who are different from me. Just the opposite. The truth of that is perhaps the most powerful demonstration of the greatest of all Jewish ideas: That everyone is created in the image of God.

Since that day, I have made it a point in my own life to try to live by their example – and the example set by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who knows that ideas are not ancient ruins or mere ornaments, but lamps that light the way. And that it is the people who live by them that give them their glow.

## *Introduction*

# The Transformative Power of Ideas

**W**hat is Judaism? A religion? A faith? A way of life? A set of beliefs? A collection of commands? A culture? A civilisation? It is all these, but it is emphatically something more.

It is a way of thinking, a constellation of ideas: a way of understanding the world and our place within it. Judaism contains life-changing ideas.

Too few people think about faith in these terms. We know the Torah contains 613 commands. We know that Judaism has beliefs. Maimonides formulated them as the thirteen principles of Jewish faith. But these are not all that Judaism is, nor are they what is most distinctive about it.

Judaism was and remains a dazzlingly original way of thinking about life. Take one of my favourite examples: the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and its most important sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that

among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This is arguably the most important sentence in the history of modern politics. It was what Abraham Lincoln was referring to in the opening of the Gettysburg Address when he said: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The irony of this sentence, as I have often noted, is that “these truths” are very far indeed from being “self-evident.” They would have sounded absurd to Plato and Aristotle, both of whom believed that not all men are created equal and therefore they do not have equal rights. They were only self-evident to someone brought up in a culture that had deeply internalised the Hebrew Bible and the revolutionary idea set out in its first chapter, that we are each, regardless of colour, culture, class, or creed, in the image and likeness of God. This was one of Judaism’s world-changing ideas.

We also see from this example that you can have an idea, formulate it in words, and declare it to the world, but you may still struggle to internalise it and you may have to fight to make it real. Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration of Independence, was a slave owner. Evidently he did not include black people or slaves in his phrase “all men.” Eighty-seven years later, when Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, America was fighting a civil war over just this issue.

However long it takes, though, ideas change the world. Some do so by leading to inventions. Think of some of the great ideas of recent times: the computer, the internet, search engines, social networking software, and smartphones. They all had to be thought before they could be made. As we say (talking about Shabbat and Creation): *Sof maaseh, bema’ashava te’hila*, which roughly means, first there needs to be the thought; only then can the idea be turned into reality by the deed. Shabbat itself, incidentally, is another one of Judaism’s world-changing ideas.

But sometimes ideas change the world because they change us. It’s these ideas I want to explore through the weekly *parasha*.

## **IDEAS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE**

My own life has been changed by ideas, not always exclusively Jewish ones but ideas nonetheless. Here are three examples.

More than twenty years ago I started an organisation, Jewish Continuity, whose aim was to transform the Jewish community by intensifying education at all levels and ages. It was successful, but it proved to be intensely controversial. The lay leader of the organisation, Dr Michael Sinclair, was an extraordinary man who poured his money, energy, and time into the project, and was always thinking outside the box. At the height of the controversy I invited him to meet the rabbis of our community, so that they could express some of their concerns. The meeting did not go well. The rabbis were very candid but throughout it all, Dr Sinclair stayed beatifically calm. When the session was over I walked with him to his car, and apologised for the way he had been treated. He smiled at me, told me not to worry, and said, “This is a character-forming experience.”

For me, at that moment, the impact of his response was electrifying, and it changed my life. Here was a man who had voluntarily given so much to our community, and all he had received in return was criticism. It reminded me of the famous remark, “No good deed goes unpunished.” Throughout it all, though, he had remained serene because he had been able to step back from the immediacy of the moment and reframe it as an ordeal he had to go through to reach his destination, one that would ultimately make him stronger. Ever since, whenever I faced controversy or crisis, I said to myself, “That was a character-forming experience.” And because I thought it, it was.

The second example: Like all too many people nowadays I have problems sleeping. I suffer from insomnia. I once mentioned this to my teacher, Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, of blessed memory. His immediate response was: Could I teach him how to have insomnia? He would love, he told me, to be able not to sleep, and quoted to me the rabbinic dictum, “Moonlight was made only for the purpose of study” (Eiruvin 65a). What I saw as an affliction, he saw as an opportunity. By sleeping less, I could study more. It did not stop me suffering from sleeplessness (though I found it helped me relate better to the line from Psalms, “The guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps”), but it did allow me to reframe it. I was able better to use the sleepless hours.

For me, the most personally transformative of all beliefs has been the idea of *hashgaha 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?" I learned this through my early encounters with Chabad and with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I learned it a second time, from a different starting point, through my study of the work of Viktor Frankl, the man who survived Auschwitz and turned his experiences there into a new form of psychotherapy based on what he called "man's search for meaning." His view was that we should never ask, "What do I want from life?" but always, "What does life want from me?" It was with surprise and delight that I discovered that the Rebbe was himself an admirer of Viktor Frankl's work. 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.

Ideas change lives.

### **JEWISH IDEAS**

Jews contributed to the world some of its most transformative ideas. It's worth listening to the testimony of non-Jewish writers on this subject. The Catholic historian Paul Johnson wrote: "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."<sup>2</sup>

Another Catholic historian, Thomas Cahill, wrote: "The Jews gave us the Outside and the Inside – our outlook and our inner life. We can hardly get up in the morning or cross the street without being Jewish. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact – new, adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice – are the gifts of the Jews."<sup>3</sup>

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2. *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1987), 585.

3. *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Talese/Anchor Books, 1998), 240–41.

The late William Rees-Mogg, also a Catholic, once wrote, “One of the gifts of Jewish culture to Christianity is that it has taught Christians to think like Jews,” adding, “Any modern man who has not learned to think as though he were a Jew can hardly be said to have learned to think at all.”<sup>4</sup>

By far the most fascinating judgment, though, comes from one of Judaism’s sharpest critics, Friedrich Nietzsche:

Consider Jewish scholars in this light: All of them have a high regard for logic, that is for compelling agreement by force of reasons; they know with that they are bound to win, even where they encounter race and class prejudices. . . . Incidentally, Europe owes the Jews no small thanks for making people think more logically and for establishing cleaner intellectual habits – nobody more so than the Germans, who are a lamentably *déraisonnable* race who to this day are still in need of having their “heads washed” first. Wherever Jews have won influence they have taught men to make finer distinctions, more rigorous inferences, and to write in a more luminous and cleanly fashion; their task was ever to bring a people “to listen to *raison*.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a remarkable tribute from what in British politics they call “the leader of the Opposition.”

One might think that the ideas Judaism introduced into the world have become part of the common intellectual heritage of humankind, at least of the West, and that they are by now, as Jefferson said, “self-evident.” Yet this is not the case. Some of them have been lost over time; others the West never fully understood. That is what I hope to explore in these studies, for two reasons.

The first was suggested by Nietzsche himself. He wanted the West to abandon the Judaeo-Christian ethic in favour of what he called “the will to power.” This was a disastrous mistake. There is nothing original

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4. *The Reigning Error: The Crisis of World Inflation* (London: Hamilton, 1974), 11.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 291.



## Introduction

in the will to power. It has existed since the days of Cain, and its price is perennial bloodshed. But Nietzsche was right in one respect: the great alternative is Judaism. The choice humankind faces in every age is between the idea of power and the power of ideas. Judaism has always believed in the power of ideas, and it remains the only non-violent way to change the world.

The second is neither political nor philosophical but personal. Some ideas really are life-changing. In each chapter I will try to introduce you to one from the *parasha*. If we change the way we think, we can change the way we feel, which changes the way we act, which changes the person we become. Ideas change lives, and great ideas help us to courage, to happiness, and to lives filled with blessing.

It is not always easy to write books in the midst of the pressures of public life, which means that I have always been dependent on my office team. I have been especially blessed by my present team of Joanna Benarroch, Dan Sacker, and Debby Ifield, for whom I thank the Almighty daily. They are a joy to work with, and without their calm efficiency and devotion beyond the call of duty I doubt whether I could have written this book or any of the others these past few years.

In one of the most beautiful of Psalms, King David wrote: “Who can discern their own errors? Forgive my unperceived faults.” It is always easy to get things wrong, and I have to thank two people in particular for pointing out mistakes in this as in other works: David Frei, registrar of the London Beth Din, and Professor Leslie Wagner. I am hugely in their debt. David has a range of knowledge that is simply breathtaking, and Leslie can spot faulty logic at a hundred yards. No one could ask for better or gentler friends.

My thanks as always to my publisher, Matthew Miller, and the team at Maggid Books for their wonderful enthusiasm and professionalism. It’s a privilege working with them.

I am indebted to Bari Weiss for her engaging, uplifting, and generous foreword. I had the honour of hosting Bari at my home earlier this year for a Facebook Live conversation about her own insightful book on anti-Semitism. That book, together with her inspiring writing in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, is a *Kiddush Hashem*, and has shown the

power of living a Judaism that is truly engaged with the world. I have no doubt she will continue to be a source of pride for all of us for many years to come.

I save my deepest thanks for my wife Elaine, and our children, Joshua, Dina, and Gila, and their respective families. They have taught me more about life than I have taught them. As I write in this introduction, the choice with which humankind is faced in every age is between the idea of power and the power of ideas. Judaism through the millennia has been a living embodiment of the power of ideas to sustain a people and be a transformative force wherever those ideas penetrated the world. I have taken great pride in seeing how my children have translated Judaism's ideas into their own lives, careers, and families with courage and imagination, each in their own way, and each in a way that I find inspiring. May Hashem give them and us the strength to be motivated by the pursuit of ideas, and thereby be a blessing to the Jewish people and the world.

Genesis

בראשית

*Bereshit*

## The Faith of God

**I**n stately prose the Torah in its opening chapter describes the unfolding of the universe, the effortless creation of a single creative Force. Repeatedly we read, “And God said, Let there be ... and there was ... and God saw that it was good” – until we come to the creation of humankind. Suddenly the whole tone of the narrative changes:

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of heaven, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every moving thing that moves upon the earth.” So God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

The problems are obvious. First, why the preface, “Let us make...”? In no other case does God verbally reflect on what He is about to create before He creates it. Second, who is the “us”? At that time there was no “us.” There was only God.

There are many answers, but here I want to focus only on one given by the Talmud. It is quite extraordinary. The “us” refers to the angels with whom God consulted. He did so because He was faced with a fateful dilemma. By creating *Homo sapiens*, God was making the one being other than Himself capable of destroying life on earth. Read Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel* or *Collapse*<sup>1</sup> and you will discover how destructive humans have been wherever they have set foot, creating environmental damage and human devastation on a massive scale. We are still doing so. This is how the Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b) describes what happened before God created humankind:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create man, He created a group of ministering angels and asked them, “Do you agree that we should make man in our image?” They replied, “Sovereign of the Universe, what will be his deeds?” God showed them the history of mankind. The angels replied (Ps. 8:5), “What is man that You are mindful of him?” [in other words, let man not be created]. God destroyed the angels. He created a second group, and asked them the same question, and they gave the same answer. God destroyed them. He created a third group of angels, and they replied, “Sovereign of the Universe, the first and second group of angels told You not to create man, and it did not avail them. You did not listen. What then can we say but this: The universe is Yours. Do with it as You wish.”

Then God created man.

When it came to the generation of the Flood, and then to the generation of the builders of Babel, the angels said to God, “Were not the first angels right? See how great is the corruption of mankind.”

Then God replied (Is. 46:4), “Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient.”

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1. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997); *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking Press, 2004).

This goes to the core of the dilemma even God could not escape. Were He not to create humanity there would be no one in the universe capable of understanding that he or she was created and that God exists. Only with the birth of humanity did the universe become self-conscious. Without us, it would be as if God had created billions of robots mindlessly doing what they been programmed to do for all eternity. So, even though by creating humans God was putting the entire future of creation at risk, God proceeded to create humankind.

This is radical theology indeed. The Talmud is telling us is that the existence of humankind can only be explained by the fact that God had faith in man. As the *Sifrei* explains the phrase in Moses' song, "the God of faith" (Deut. 32:4) – this means, "the God who had faith in the universe and created it."<sup>2</sup> 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 behaviour disappoints and sometimes appals Him. Yet He never gives up.

He tries with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, a string of judges and kings. He tries with women also, and here succeeds much better. They are more faithful, less violent, less obsessed with power. But He refuses to give up on men. He has His most passionate relationship with the prophets. They understand Him and become bearers of His word. Yet most of the prophets end up as disappointed with people as is God.

The real subject of the Torah is not our faith in God, which is often faltering, but His unfailing faith in us. The Torah is not man's book of God. It is God's book of man. He spends a mere thirty-four verses describing His own creation of the universe, but more than five hundred verses describing the Israelites' creation of a tiny, temporary, portable building called the *Mishkan*, the Sanctuary. God never stops believing in us, loving us, and hoping for the best from us. There are moments when He almost despairs. Our *parasha* says so:

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2. *Sifrei, Haazinu* 325.

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that He had made human beings on the earth, and He was grieved to His very core. (Gen. 6:5–6)

But Noah, good, innocent, upright, consoles Him. For the sake of one good man God was prepared to begin again.

Of course, all of this is a matter of faith – as is all belief in the thoughts and feelings of persons other than myself. Do I really know whether those closest to me – my marriage partner, my children, my companions, my friends – love me or have faith in me, or is that just wishful thinking on my part? Atheists sometimes think that belief in God is irrational while belief in other people is rational. That is simply not so. The proof is the failure of the man who, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, sought to put philosophy on a rational basis: Rene Descartes. Descartes famously said, *Cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” All he was sure of was his own existence. For anything else – the existence of physical objects, let alone other minds – even he had to invoke God.

I for one do not have enough faith to be an atheist.<sup>3</sup> To be an atheist you have to have faith, either in humankind as a whole, or in yourself. How anyone can have faith in humankind after the Holocaust defies all reason. The single most calculated, sustained crime of man against man happened not in some benighted third-world country, but in the heart of a Europe that had given birth to Kant and Hegel, Bach

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3. Of course an atheist might say – Sigmund Freud came close to saying this – that faith is simply a comforting illusion. That really is not so. It is far more demanding to believe that God summons us to responsibility, that He asks us to fight for justice, equality, and human dignity, and that He holds us accountable for what we do, than to believe that there is no meaning to human existence other than ones we invent for ourselves, no ultimate truth, no absolute moral standards, and no one to whom we will have to give an account of our lives. Fifty years of reflection on this issue have led me to conclude that it is atheism that is, morally and existentially, the easy option – and I say this having known and studied with some of the greatest atheists of our time. That is not to say that I am critical of atheists. To the contrary, in a secular age, it is the default option. That is why now, more than at any other time in the past two thousand years, it takes courage to have and live by religious faith.

and Beethoven, Goethe and Schiller. Civilisation utterly failed to civilise. Humanism did not make men humane.

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 from 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?”

As for believing only in yourself, that is hubris. Every serious thinker since the dawn of history has known that this ends in nemesis.

There are only two serious possibilities to be entertained by serious minds. Either the one put forward by the Torah that we are here because a Force greater than the universe wanted us to be, or the alternative: that the universe exists because of a random fluctuation in the quantum field, and we are here because of a mindless sequence of genetic mutations blindly sifted by natural selection. Either there is or there is not meaning to the human condition. The first possibility yields Isaiah; the second, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Greek tragedy. The Greece of antiquity died. The Israel of Abraham and Moses still lives.

I respect those who choose Greek tragedy over Jewish hope. But those who choose Judaism have made space in their minds for the most life-changing idea of all: Whether or not we have faith in God, God has faith in us.

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).



We may lose heart; God never will. We may despair; God will give us hope. God believes in us even if we don't believe in ourselves. We may sin and disappoint and come short again and again, but God never ceases to forgive us when we fail, and lift us when we fall.

Have faith in God's faith in us and you will find the path from darkness to light.

**Life-Changing Idea #1**

*God believes in us even if we don't always believe in ourselves. Remember this, and you will find the path from darkness to light.*