

INTERMARRIAGE

A black and white photograph of a person's silhouette standing in a tunnel. The person's arms are outstretched horizontally, holding onto the tunnel walls. At the far end of the tunnel, a bright, circular light source creates a strong glow, casting the person's shadow onto the tunnel floor. The tunnel walls are textured and appear to be made of stone or concrete. The entire image is framed by a thin orange border.

IS THERE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

BY
RABBI MICHAEL SKOBAC

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UJA Federation
OF GREATER TORONTO

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THE CRISIS

The topic of intermarriage is very emotionally charged, and many people are quickly offended or put off when it is raised. Nevertheless, we need to talk about this issue as it relates to Jewish continuity. It doesn't have to be an uncomfortable discussion. But this is a serious issue that is not going away anytime soon, and if we bury our heads in the sand and ignore it, we will be doing so at our own peril.

The North American Jewish community was jolted by demographic studies published around 1990 that revealed a number of serious fault lines on the continuity front. One report claimed that 12% of American Jews were practising religions other than Judaism¹, while others claimed that more than half of American Jews were marrying non-Jews². These statistics, coupled with the fact that families were having fewer children, led to a growing concern about the survival of the Jewish community in the Diaspora³. One gloomy newspaper headline read, "If you're Jewish, the chances are that your grandchildren won't be."

Unfortunately, these sobering statistics have not improved over the past 20 years and have really been part of a general trajectory that started over 50 years ago. Indeed, before the 1960s, the intermarriage rate was only about 6%. But by the mid 1960s, it climbed to 17.4% and by 1971, to 31.7%. By the late 1980s it was up to over 50%.⁴

Not only have the rates of intermarriage grown over recent years, but also many associated issues have changed significantly. For example, in the 1960s about 25% of non-Jewish spouses would

1 Elliot Abrams, *Faith or Fear* (New York, 1997) pp.9-10; www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/ajisbook.pdf

2 Abrams, pp.99-101; Jonathan Sacks, *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* (London, 1994) p.21; David C. Gross, *Why Remain Jewish?* (New York, 1994) p.73-75.

3 Ari Shavit, "Vanishing: As American Jews Fail to Reproduce and as They Intermarry They Are Facing Cultural Extinction" *The New York Times Magazine*, June 8, 1997. Cited in *Jewish Identity in the Postmodern Age*, edited by Charles Selengut (St. Paul, 1999) p.37 and in Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew* (New York, 1997).

4 Sacks, p.21

convert to Judaism. Today that number has dropped to about 5%⁵. Recent studies have shown that only about 20% of Jewish parents strongly oppose intermarriage. This fact obviously impacts the attitudes being transmitted to the next generation.

It should come as no surprise that intermarriage and assimilation are intimately related. Studies have found that of children raised in mixed marriages, 28% are being raised as Jews, 41% as Christian and 31% with no religion. Only 24% of children born into intermarried families identify as Jews and 90% will themselves intermarry. In one three-generational study done in Philadelphia, none of the grandchildren of mixed marriages identified as Jews.⁶

Of course, statistical studies are not necessarily an exact science – but where there’s smoke there’s usually fire. The general trends should definitely give us pause to reflect and take stock. But we need to be honest with ourselves.

Two men were injured in a car accident and taken to the hospital emergency room. An ER doctor came in and began examining one of the men. As soon as the doctor touched his leg, he let out a blood-curdling scream and writhed in pain. The doctor apologized and said he had to step out of the room for a few minutes. When he returned, he began to examine the second patient who made no sound as the doctor probed and examined his leg. When the doctor once again left the room, the first man turned to his friend and expressed his astonishment at how stoical he was during the exam. His friend replied, “What are you talking about? After I saw what happened to you, do you think I was going to show him my bad leg?”

5 Abrams, pp.99-100

6 Doron Kornbluth, *Why Marry Jewish?* (Southfield, MI, 2003) pp.94-104; Abrams pp.109-114.

THE REAL QUESTION

In truth, intermarriage is not really the problem that needs to be addressed – it is merely a symptom of the real, underlying issue.

A number of years ago, I was invited to speak to a group of Jewish students at the University of Windsor about the missionary threat to the Jewish community. Halfway through my presentation, one of the students interrupted, “This topic doesn’t really concern us.” I asked her what she would prefer to discuss. “We want to know what’s wrong with dating people who aren’t Jewish.”

Very few young Jews receive satisfying answers to this question. They strongly feel that their personal happiness should trump whatever opinions their parents might have on the matter. For many, the Jewish taboo on intermarriage sounds like small-minded intolerance or even racism.

The students in Windsor were interested in hearing how I would respond to this question. I told the young woman that I couldn’t answer her question because it’s the wrong question. Of course, everyone wanted to immediately know the right question. I stated that the real question is not, “Why shouldn’t I marry a person who is not Jewish?” The real question is, “Why should I be Jewish?”

I explained that if Judaism were deeply meaningful and compelling to the point that it formed the central organizing principle of their lives – then there is no need to explain why it makes sense to marry only within their faith. Of course, they immediately understood that marrying someone who doesn’t share their most central cherished values is a mistake. However, if Judaism is not ultimately meaningful to them, then it’s difficult to give a compelling reason not to intermarry.

When we understand this premise, it becomes clear that for serious, involved Jews, even those Jews who are not committed to Judaism might also represent a risky marriage choice. The concern about intermarriage is most certainly not a racial issue.⁷

7 Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism* (New York, 1981) pp. 146-147; Kornbluth, pp.108-113.

The *problem* with the person who is not Jewish is that he/she is not interested in living according to the teachings of Judaism. Unfortunately, this is true for many Jews as well.

If a non-Jew became interested in Judaism and wanted to commit his/her life to it, that person could convert and become a perfectly suitable marriage partner.

Far too many young Jews are given the implicit message that they must eliminate as potential dating partners over 95% of the people they will meet. Unfortunately, these young Jews receive insufficient knowledge about Judaism and even less appreciation for why their religion is worthy of this sacrifice.

The real question is, “Does Judaism have anything that makes it worth wrapping my life around?” and then finding a partner who will share that passion.

THE BARREL

The people in the small Polish village were very excited. The rabbi's only son was about to get married to a wonderful girl from the village.

In honour of the upcoming wedding, the town council instructed that a huge barrel be constructed in the middle of the public square. A large ladder was set up along the side of the barrel leading to the top. The plan was for each of the townspeople to bring a pail of the best wine from their homes and pour it into the barrel. With this impressive vat of wine, there would be plenty on hand to enhance the celebration of the special wedding.

Over the next two weeks, the villagers came in a steady stream to pour the contents of their pails into the great barrel. As the date of the wedding approached, they could see the level of the liquid climbing upward as the barrel's wood absorbed its moisture. Everyone grew in excitement as the barrel became more and more full.

Finally the big day arrived and everyone cheered “Mazel Tov” as the groom broke the glass under the wedding canopy. Afterward, everyone made their way to the town square to begin the celebration.

Musicians struck up joyous tunes and the villagers sang along with gusto. When the head of the town council approached the barrel to address the crowd, everyone gathered around with empty pitchers in their hands, ready to fill them with the special sweet wine.

After wishing congratulations to the bride and groom and their families, he placed his flask under the spigot and opened it. Everyone shouted “Mazel Tov!” – but the joy was short-lived. No wine flowed from the spigot – only water!

Everyone looked away with a very guilty look on his face. For the past two weeks, everyone had the same thought. “There will be so much wine in that barrel, no one will know the difference if I put in water instead.” What should have been a wonderfully joyous occasion was unfortunately turned into one of the saddest days in the history of that village.⁸

I often speak with parents who are distraught about their child’s impending intermarriage. One of things I ask them is to tell me about their child’s Jewish life. Usually, I’m told about their Jewish education, high school trip to Israel, going with their kids to the synagogue and other events during their formative years.

However, I’m primarily interested in what part Judaism plays in their child’s life now, not what he/she may have done 10 years earlier. At this point, the parents might tell me that their son or daughter comes home to visit them occasionally for Passover or the High Holidays. And then I ask, “But how are they connected to Judaism when they are not visiting with you?” Most parents I’ve spoken with are totally stymied by this question. Their children are really *not* that different in terms of their interests and activities from their non-Jewish friends, neighbours and business

8 Adapted from Laney Katz Becker, *Three Times Chai* (Springfield, NJ, 2007) pp.4-5.

associates. Therefore, it's no mystery that for most young Jews, the fact that someone isn't born into a Jewish family is not a deal breaker in dating and marriage.

When the CEO of a large company goes through the day, is there ever a moment when that person is not aware that he/she is the CEO? If someone is the parent of a child, does the awareness of that responsibility ever escape his/her consciousness? Marriage, as well, becomes a defining prism of the way a person sees him/herself and how that person behaves each and every day.

There are identities we assume that totally animate and impact everything we do during all the days of our lives. Judaism is supposed to be that way as well.

Sixty years ago, when the intermarriage rates were less than 6%, most people were not living their Judaism 24/7. So what kept their families intact back then?

We might say that they were living off the spiritual savings deposited by their ancestors. There was a time when Jewish families invested heavily in Judaism and truly sacrificed for it. But all too often, their descendants withdrew from those resources without replenishing the account. And so, with less and less gas in the tank, we find ourselves coasting on fumes.

We can pass on to the next generation a desire to commit to Judaism and sacrifice for it – but only if we ourselves are heavily steeped and invested in it. If we don't grow in our Judaism, we stagnate. And if we don't keep adding real substance to our spiritual barrel, we will ultimately end up with very watered down Jewish lives.

A SHAKY FOUNDATION

There are many paths out of Judaism. Some people become involved in New Age philosophies or eastern religions. Others are drawn to Christianity and groups, such as Jews for Jesus. However, the largest exodus is among those on the assimilation track who the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach referred to as “Jews for Nothing.” Each of these groups is a litmus test of our community’s spiritual health, and there are common risk factors associated with all of them.

Just as knowledge is power, a lack of knowledge is a dangerous weakness. People with little or no knowledge about the basics of Judaism will have a difficult time coming to appreciate it.

Jewish parents usually have high expectations for their children’s education. Attending college or university is often the norm. Many are encouraged to obtain graduate and other advanced degrees. It’s a tough world out there and parents, understandably, want their children to have the necessary tools to succeed in life.

Ironically, while parents encourage excellence and high achievement in their children’s secular education, they regularly tolerate mediocrity in their children’s Jewish education. How can parents expect their children to survive, much less thrive, in a world fraught with so many powerful challenges to Jewish continuity when they provide them with the equivalent of a 5th grade Jewish education?⁹

Over the years, I’ve distributed different versions of a (tongue-in-cheek) “Jewish I.Q. Test” to Jewish university students to drive home this point. The results are always unsettling:

- 1) **What was the name of Jesus’ mother? What was the name of Moses’ mother?**
- 2) **Who is Madonna? Who was Chanah?**

⁹ “The amount of Judaism and the Jewish tradition that is slipping through the fingers of American Jewry in times of peace and prosperity is greater than anything that has ever happened in the modern period anywhere. *It is a scandal.*” Leon Wieseltier cited in Abigail Pogrebin, *Stars of David* (New York, 2005) p.155.

- 3) Name a book in the New Testament. Name a book in the Talmud.
- 4) Who wrote *Das Kapital*? Who wrote *A Guide to the Perplexed*?
- 5) Who was Nostradamus? Who was Onkelos?
- 6) What is the traditional birthday of Jesus? What is the birthday of Moses?
- 7) What is a Hat Trick? What is a Siyum HaShas?
- 8) What does Trinity refer to? What does Taryag refer to?
- 9) Who wrote most of the Beatles' songs? Who wrote most of the Psalms?¹⁰

By the end of their teen years, many young Jews have acquired a smattering of Hebrew, some Bible stories, Jewish history and holiday customs. But have they ever studied our Torah in-depth with its classical commentaries? Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) wrote his commentary to the Jewish Bible one thousand years ago in France. Over 300 scholars have written super-commentaries on Rashi, carefully analyzing each of his priceless words. Countless brilliant Jewish minds have dedicated themselves to plumbing the depths of our Bible and have written eye-opening expositions. Unfortunately, very few Jewish students have been nourished and inspired by the fruits of their thinking. Although we have been called the People of the Book, today far more of our people are engaged with Facebook than with the Good Book.

The Talmud, a vast treasure trove of spiritual wisdom, has been one of the essential fountains of Jewish teaching for the past 1,500 years. Far too few Jewish people have ever peeked into any of its volumes. Profoundly deep Jewish philosophers and mystical sages whose wisdom has inspired centuries of seekers remain virtually unknown to the vast majority of our people. Yehudah Halevi, Maimonides, the Maharal of Prague, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the Sfat Emet, Rabbi Israel Salanter and so many others have produced works of tremendous depth that reveal the eternal beauty and relevance of Judaism. Sadly, far

¹⁰ See Appendix

too few Jews have ever tasted what these spiritual giants have gifted to us, even though all these works have been translated into English.

Moreover, so many young Jews define themselves negatively, by what they don't believe. I have asked student groups to devise the definition of a Jew, and one of the most popular answers is, "A Jew is someone who doesn't believe in Jesus." Aside from the fact that this answer isn't true, how sad that so many define themselves by what they *don't* believe. When I probe deeper and ask these students what they *do* believe, too often I get only blank stares. Thus, it shouldn't be a surprise that Jews who lack a serious meaningful Jewish education have a hard time answering the question, "Why Be Jewish?"

WHEN THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD

Even though Jewish education is critically important, there's much more to nurturing Jewish health than accumulating information. It's not enough to just know something intellectually – we must also develop a deep emotional connection to it. We must feel what we know. For example, it's not enough to simply know that it is wrong to steal, to take something that doesn't belong to us. The possibility of doing this action must become thoroughly abhorrent to us. The Torah urges us to take our head knowledge and to bring it to our hearts.¹¹

The realm of the experiential is where we can develop an intense emotional attachment to Judaism. Unfortunately, this is often the weakest link in our Jewish chain. If we take the pulse of Jews who haven't connected with Judaism, we find a common trajectory. This group may have attended Hebrew school, had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, celebrated Chanukah at home, attended Passover Seders and High Holiday services – but sadly, they seldom or never experienced any of these activities in a spiritual way. Their experience of Judaism was centered in

¹¹ Deuteronomy 4:39

culture, tradition, ethnicity and identity – but not as a rich and meaningful spiritual path of the soul.

A wise person once remarked that the difference between religion and spirituality is like the difference between reading a menu and eating the meal. People are not properly nourished when they experience Judaism as dry or boring. Prayer, for example, is meant to be a deeply moving and emotional personal experience.¹² We cannot exist, individually or as a nation, without the spiritual essence that is the core of Judaism. Yet for so many Jewish people, this vital core is hiding in plain sight. For many, Judaism has become a system of externalities that does not touch or impact upon their inner lives.

The ultimate ideas and concepts of Judaism are not easily communicated to young children because they can't understand or appreciate these deeper and more complex ideas. For them, Jewish life has to be enjoyable, fun and experienced in a warm and loving family environment. However as these children become mature adults, they must be exposed to more sophisticated and nuanced ways of understanding the depth of Judaism. To merely go through the motions of Judaism with a shallow conception of what it all means results in a tasteless and uninspiring experience. However, something profound can take place in the depth of our souls when we open ourselves up to the rich potential of our tradition and allow it to permeate our lives.

In 2005, Abigail Pogrebin published *Stars of David* in which she interviewed dozens of prominent Jews about their experience of being Jewish. In the epilogue, she shared the following self-reflection:

*A funny thing happened on my way to finishing this book:
I became more Jewish. I'm not saying I now keep kosher or*

12 It is unfortunate that we so rarely see signs of real emotion in our synagogues. Flowing tears or joyous enthusiasm are rare birds. Franz Rosenzweig was more fortunate. Growing up in an assimilated Jewish family, he decided to convert to Christianity in 1913. He felt, however, that he needed to visit a synagogue before taking this step. So, on the eve of his intended baptism, he stepped into a small synagogue in Berlin. It was the moving Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur eve. He was so struck by the awesome intensity of the service that he resolved on the spot to return to Judaism. He became a noted Jewish philosopher and published *The Star of Redemption* and other works.

*daven every morning. What I mean is that I've become more stirred by Judaism – more impatient to understand it, more surprised by how preoccupying it is, less baffled by those who prioritize it. Judaism became a richer piece of my life.*¹³

DOES JUDAISM HAVE A CHANCE?

Despite the tremendous continuity challenges our communities are facing today, there are many Jews who *do* live richly fulfilling Jewish lives. Their embrace of Judaism is *not* just to ensure their children will remain within the Jewish fold. For them, Judaism offers so much and is so compelling that they cannot imagine living their lives any other way.

Today, our world is moving very quickly, and change is the only constant. The digital universe is seeping into every corner of life and our individuality feels as if it is evaporating in the immense sea of cyberspace. Today, it is all too easy to feel alienated and become cynical. Now, more than ever, we have a need for meaning and transcendence in our lives.

In our secular world, the general tendency is not to focus on ultimate questions of meaning, but rather to busy ourselves in materialistic pursuits, entertainment, travel and other forms of escape. However, these activities often fail to satisfy, and people begin to wonder if there is anything more to life, if there is anything else out there? People are restless and seek to satisfy an inner calling for ultimate meaning and a life of purpose. Can Jewish people find these answers within Judaism?

WHY BE JEWISH?

Almost 4,000 years ago, Abraham and Sarah left their land to go on a journey that would launch the Jewish people and Judaism. One of history's greatest mysteries is that we are still here. Every Jew alive today is another link in this eternal chain

¹³ Pogrebin, p.381.

even though, over the millennia, countless numbers of our people disconnected from this chain by converting to other religions or assimilating into the cultures where they found themselves.

For those who committed themselves to living Jewish lives and passing the torch to their children – what drove them to do it? What was it about Judaism that kept them connected, motivated them to grow within it and even sacrifice for it? The following discussion is not meant to be exhaustive, but outlines some elements of Judaism that people have found compelling.¹⁴

JUDAISM IS REAL

Human beings have been implanted with an instinct and sensitivity for truth. We gravitate to that which is true and are allergic to that which is not true. Another word for truth is reality. When something is true, it is real. We all seek to live lives that are real and authentic – and this is about as bottom line as it gets when it comes to being human.

The most compelling thing about Judaism is that it is true. Judaism is rooted in the historical experience of an entire people – and this truth remains unparalleled in the history of humanity.

Our ancestors were enslaved for over 200 years in Egypt during the infancy of their history. Amid an incredible flurry of supernatural miracles, we were liberated from Egypt and escaped from the mighty Egyptian army with the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. Seven weeks later, these three million liberated Hebrew slaves stood on the desert floor at Mount Sinai and experienced the revelation of God's Torah.

*I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me...*¹⁵

¹⁴ Numerous books have been authored addressing this question. Among them, Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll* (New York, 2000); Doron Kornbluth, *Why Be Jewish?* (Jerusalem, 2011); David J. Wolpe, *Why Be Jewish?* (New York, 1995).

¹⁵ Exodus 20:1-2

The birth of other religions has always begun with an individual who claimed that God communicated with him. But at Mount Sinai, it wasn't only Moses who heard God – it was our entire nation.

*You might inquire about times long past, going back to the time that God created man on earth, (exploring) one end of the heavens to the other. See if anything as great as this has ever happened, or if the like has ever been heard. Has any nation ever heard God speaking out of fire, as you have, and still survived? Has God ever done miracles bringing one nation out of another nation with such tremendous miracles, signs, wonders, war, a mighty hand and outstretched arm and awesome phenomena, as God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You have been shown in order to know that the Lord, He is the God. There is none beside Him!*¹⁶

This event is so rooted in reality that both Christianity and Islam accept the account. Significantly, the Torah predicted over 3,000 years ago that no other nation would ever make the claim to have experienced a national revelation. While an individual's claim to a personal revelation may or may not be true, a national revelation cannot be fabricated.

Because this event is the rock-solid foundation of Judaism and the anchor that proves its veracity, God warned us never to forget it:

*Only take heed and watch yourself very carefully, so that you do not forget the things that your eyes saw. Do not let (this memory) leave your hearts all the days of your lives. Teach your children and your children's children about the day you stood before God your Lord at Horeb (Sinai)...*¹⁷

To implant these seminal events in our minds and our bones, Judaism's three major "pilgrim festivals" are devoted to them. On Passover, we don't just remember, we relive and re-experience our Exodus from Egypt. On Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) we reconnect

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 4:32-35

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 4:9-10

with the revelation at Mount Sinai. On Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) we celebrate the miracles God provided to sustain us in the desert on our 40-year trek to the Promised Land.

This is our people's story, our eternal narrative, and we should never feel uncomfortable or reluctant to affirm it. The Talmud teaches *bari v'shema bari adif*—a claim that is certain is much more credible than a claim that is uncertain.¹⁸ As Jews, it is critical that we develop clarity about our beliefs and understand why we hold them to be true.

When we reflect on the principle that Judaism is based in fact, in reality – and we connect with this truth – we have rocket fuel in our Jewish engine.¹⁹

THE SECRET

The Torah that God revealed to the Jewish people has been the heart that has kept our people beating for the past 3,300 years. The Torah is not only God's instructions for how we are to live. Through its profoundly deep and inspiring wisdom, the Torah also reveals to us the “mind” of God.

*Safeguard and keep (these instructions) because they are your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the nations. They will hear all these teachings and say, 'This great nation is certainly a wise and understanding people.' What nation is so great that they have God close to it, as God our Lord is, whenever we call upon Him? What nation is so great that they have such righteous teachings and laws, like the entire Torah that I am presenting before you today?*²⁰

18 Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 12b

19 Numerous works explore this vital foundational concept. Among them, Rabbi Dr. David Gottlieb, *Living Up to the Truth* (Jerusalem, 1997); Rabbi Yitzchok Fingerer, *Search Judaism* (Southfield, 2009), pp.136-145; Lawrence Kelemen, *Permission to Receive* (Southfield, 1996); Yitzchak Coopersmith, *The Eye of a Needle* (Southfield, 2005) pp.69-107; Rabbi Shmuel Waldman, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Jerusalem, 2002) pp.48-106; <http://sami119.tripod.com/shemaisrael/id80.html>

20 Deuteronomy 4:5-8

The Torah addresses virtually every issue that one can imagine. The treatment of animals, business ethics, how to have fulfilling relationships, understanding human nature, the afterlife and supernatural realms, how to raise children, ecology, how prayer works, suffering, holiness, metaphysics, mysticism and countless other matters. No wonder people have found the Torah relevant in every corner of the world for thousands of years! As the Talmud says, “Turn it over and turn it over because everything is in it.”²¹

But the Torah is even much more than wisdom – it is the loving communication of our loving Creator – a beautiful love letter that we have cherished and pored over for thousands of years because it communicates His love for us. A passage from our prayer book famously expresses this thought, “For they are our life and length of our days and on them we will meditate day and night.”²²

Recently, about 100,000 Jews gathered at the Metlife Stadium in New Jersey to celebrate the completion of their study of the entire Talmud. The participants studied one page every day, rain or shine, for 7½ years. (This is the 12th worldwide completion of the Talmud since the page-a-day program was initiated in 1923.) Similar celebrations took place in Toronto and in cities throughout the world. And the very next day, the new cycle began all over again. Can you imagine such an event to celebrate a study of the works of Shakespeare or Hemingway? There must be something extraordinary – out of this world! – about a text that can inspire hundreds of thousands of people worldwide to rise, in many cases, at 5am every morning to spend an hour immersed in its study.

Today, anyone with a desire to explore Torah can do so regardless of his/her background. Libraries of books that were formerly only accessible in Hebrew or Aramaic have been translated into English, French, Spanish and other languages. Hundreds of high-quality websites have created a convenient portal to virtually all areas of Torah study. Organizations, such as Partners in Torah

21 *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:26

22 Evening prayers, blessing before the recitation of Shma Yisrael

operate free-of-charge worldwide to link people with study partners in person or by phone.

The Torah is the secret to Jewish vitality and can become the bedrock of a richly rewarding Jewish life. “It is a tree of life to those who hold on tightly to it and fortunate are those who uphold it. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.”²³

REPAIRING THE WORLD

The Torah is not only a Jewish story. At its core, the Torah is about the world and all of humanity. The basic storyline is simple. Life was supposed to be glorious – with all of us living in an ideal paradise. However, things didn’t work out that way because people rebelled and began to suffer as a direct result of the corrupt societies they developed.

One ray of hope was discovered. God chose Abraham and his family to establish a people who would ultimately impact the world and help restore it to its full potential.

*I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you great. You shall become a blessing... All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.*²⁴

Why did God choose Abraham for this assignment? He wasn’t the only righteous person at the time, for Noah was described as being perfectly righteous. God revealed that He knew Abraham would be able to inspire his family to live righteous lives. We can also see something very significant by comparing Abraham to Noah.

Each of these men confronted the same challenge. God told Noah that He was about to destroy the world with a flood as a result of people’s wickedness. Abraham was told that the major population centres at that time, including Sodom and Gomorrah, were going to be obliterated for their evil actions.

²³ Proverbs 3:18, 17

²⁴ Genesis 12:1-3

Noah had nothing to say about the flood and obediently built the ark that God instructed him to build to save himself and his family.²⁵

Abraham immediately challenged God's plan of destruction and protested, "Will you actually wipe out the righteous together with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous people within the city. Would you destroy it and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty good people within it? It would be a sacrilege for You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the righteous along with the wicked; so the righteous shall be like the wicked. It would be a sacrilege for You! Shall the Judge of the whole world not do justice?"²⁶

If we carefully follow Abraham's line of argument, it doesn't make sense. His initial objection was that it would be immoral to kill innocent people along with the guilty. He should have then proposed that if there are 50 righteous people, these people should be spared and taken out of the city before it is destroyed. But instead, Abraham argued that if there are 50 righteous people, the whole city should be spared!

It is most significant that Abraham didn't just speak of righteous people living *in* the city – he specified people living *within* the city – people who were not isolated in a ghetto or monastery, but actually living with all the people. Abraham believed that if there were such people, they could serve as examples to the rest of the city and potentially inspire them to change and improve. Therefore, everyone should be saved.

Here we see a key difference between Noah and Abraham. Noah lost touch with the concept that every human being is created in the image of God and has free will. He saw a world so steeped in evil that he gave up on the people, concluding they were a lost cause, beyond hope or redemption. Abraham, on the other hand, never lost sight of the fact that everyone has a divine soul with the potential to change his/her life for the better.

²⁵ Genesis 6:11-7:5

²⁶ Genesis 18:17-25

Now we understand why Abraham was chosen to be the progenitor of the Jewish nation, a people who would live righteously and virtuously, serving as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”²⁷ and as “a light to the nations.”²⁸ Our national mission has always been to work toward making our world a better place.

Our approach to being a light to the nations was never to shine the light directly into their eyes. The Torah’s plan was that we should develop ourselves into a holy nation that would model what it means to live a godly life. Through His prophets, God revealed that one day, the world would take notice and come to our light.²⁹

Throughout the world, people enthusiastically commit their lives to positive causes, and there exists a tremendous pull to be part of a movement to make the world a better place. The Jewish vision is to eventually bring about a utopian world by inspiring all people to live in peace and brotherhood by accepting universal moral laws rooted in the will of the Creator. The Divine Being who brought into existence the physical laws of the universe is also the author of its moral laws. In addition, the general wisdom embodied in our Torah has the potential to bring tremendous light and healing to the world.

Countless idealistic Jews have been inspired to embrace Judaism’s divine mission to elevate mankind by introducing the concepts of ethical monotheism to the world. It’s an idealistic and grand vision of perfecting the world that we can certainly wrap our lives around.³⁰

27 Exodus 19:6

28 Isaiah 42:6; 49:6

29 Isaiah 60:3, Zechariah 8:23

30 Much has been written about historical mission of the Jewish people to improve the world. See Telushkin and Prager, pp.110-119; Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Montreal, 2005); Ken Spiro, *World Perfect* (Deerfield Beach, 2002); Yosef Ben Shlomo HaKohen, *The Universal Jew* (Jerusalem, 1995); Sacks (2000) pp. 91-105.

WHY AM I HERE?

We've discussed why the Jewish people, as a nation, exists. But why do I exist? Why am I, as an individual, here? This is the ultimate question. What is my purpose in this world? What is the ultimate meaning of my personal existence? Most of us sense that there is much more to life than the innumerable things that preoccupy us.

Many years ago, I attended the wedding of a friend in New York and met someone there from Philadelphia. He told me that he wasn't a guest, but had recently gotten engaged and was checking out different wedding venues with his fiancé.

This wedding was very special. My friend had been afflicted with polio as a child and usually got around in a wheelchair. Nevertheless, she decided to walk down the aisle at her wedding. It was difficult for her and took some time. There wasn't a dry eye in the hall.

Near the end of the wedding, I asked this man from Philadelphia if he and his fiancé were satisfied with the hall. He turned to me and said, "You know, after seeing a wedding like this, you say to yourself, 'Who cares what the hall looks like!'"

So why did God put me in this world? What is my purpose in being here? Our mystical thinkers explain that a clue to this question can be gleaned from reflecting on what dreams our parents have for our lives. What do parents desire for their kids? That's not too hard to answer. Parents who love their children hope they will enjoy lives of fulfillment and pleasure. They want ultimate happiness for their sons and daughters, and they want them to have as much as possible. Not a drop less.

God, however, has no needs. He created the world simply as an act of love in order to give. We are here to receive God's goodness and He wants nothing less than to give us the ultimate good and the ultimate pleasure.

There are many pleasures in this life – from seeing the smile of an infant, to viewing a beautiful sunset, to tasting fine dark chocolate, to hearing the melodious songs of birds. But there is an ultimate source of all the pleasures in the world, and that source is God. If all the creations of God are pleasurable, then the ultimate pleasure is the possibility of connecting ourselves to God Himself.

The Torah speaks of this bond as *devekut*, a form of the same word used to describe the intimate bond between a husband and wife. The ultimate goal of the Torah and Judaism is to help us develop a personal relationship with God and get close to Him.

The word Torah means “instruction” – the instructions are God’s – and they tell us how to develop our relationship with Him. The Hebrew word for commandment, “mitzvah”, has the same root as the word for “connector.” Thus, the purpose of every teaching and law in the Torah is to connect us with God.

Living our lives with this goal doesn’t mean that we must forgo music, sports, travel or good food. Indeed, it is possible to use each of these as part of our striving to get closer to God. In fact, the Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12 teaches that one day, we’ll be required to give an accounting for every legitimate pleasure in this world that we did not experience.

Seeking God and yearning to attach ourselves to Him is part of the meaning of spiritual growth within Judaism.³¹

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

There is a perplexing verse in the Torah’s description of the creation of man. “And God said, ‘Let us make man in Our image...’”³² Who was God speaking to?

31 Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *If You Were God* (New York, 1983) pp.41-82; Rabbi Hillel Rotenberg, *What’s the Purpose* (Southfield, 2009); Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier, *Stop Surviving and Start Living* (New York, 2010); *Building a Sanctuary in the Heart* (published anonymously in Jerusalem, 2008).

32 Genesis 1:26

Several approaches have been offered, but I want to share a most illuminating one suggested by the Chassidic masters.

The Baal Shem Tov explained that God is addressing every human being who will ever exist, “Let us create you!”

God created everything else in the world by Himself. He simply said, Let there be fish, birds, animals, etc. Each of them was created fully formed. But here, God is saying that He can’t create a human being by Himself. He can give us the raw ingredients, our bodies and souls, but what we become is a function of what we do with this potential. Therefore, God is addressing each individual and saying, “Let *us* together create you!”

Animals are created fully formed. A rabbit doesn’t become more of a rabbit as it gets older – it doesn’t evolve or self-actualize. But God didn’t fully create humans. Each one of us is a work in progress with the potential to grow in our humanness. You could say we’re each part of a movement called “Under Constructionism.”³³

If we observe children during the first 10 years of their lives, we see an incredible amount of growth and development – not just physically, but also emotionally and intellectually. The changes that take place between the ages of 10 and 20 are no less dramatic. Up until one’s twenties, there’s been a lot of growing up and maturing – but all too often, the growth slows down or ceases at around this stage of life. We don’t see much difference in many people from their 20s to their 30s, 40s to 50s, etc.

Throughout our lifetimes, we should be striving to grow spiritually – to be more patient, generous, sensitive to others, more humble, control our anger, be less self-centered, arrogant... The list of personality and soul traits that need constant refining is long, and it defines the ongoing process of actualizing our potential and creating ourselves.

33 Rabbi David Aaron refers to us as “human becomings.” See his *Endless Light* (New York, 1997), pp. 60-62.

The Torah provides us with the technology to understand ourselves, overcome our challenges and make positive changes. We don't always understand exactly how the Torah's prescriptions help us fine-tune who we are, but like nutritious food, they benefit us in many ways. Every one of the Torah's teachings and practices is designed for our growth and self-improvement.³⁴

Once in a while, it's good idea to clean out the garage or work hard at losing those 10 extra pounds. And there's certainly nothing wrong with perfecting a golf swing or fine-tuning a wardrobe. However, Judaism teaches us that spiritual self-improvement is meant to be the primary focus of our lives.

A SILVER LINING

While some Jewish people are not concerned about the steady rise in the rates of intermarriage, others feel a sense of urgency. This pressure is especially disconcerting in those families where the issue is hitting close to home.

If there is any silver lining in this crisis, it's the potential for intermarriage to serve as our vital wakeup call. There is only one way out of this quagmire – we must spiritually strengthen ourselves and our families. We must start to take Judaism seriously and to live committed Jewish lives.

Many people are intimidated, overwhelmed by the idea of making a commitment to Judaism and to spiritual growth. They fear that not doing everything required of them would be hypocritical. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Judaism is not an all or nothing proposition. Ideally, we should always strive to improve and grow – but any start, at any stage, is always worthwhile.

³⁴ There is a vast literature on personal growth in Judaism. For a good introduction, see Alan Morinis, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (New York, 2002); Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness* (Boston, 2007); Alan Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day* (Boston, 2010); www.mussarinstitute.org and www.madrega.com

A great Jewish sage once shared the following parable. Imagine that someone tells you there is a nearby street covered with diamonds, and you have five minutes to pick them all up. Would anyone walk away because they knew they couldn't possibly pick up all those diamonds in the allotted time? Of course not! They would grab as many as they could even if they couldn't get them all.

No one is able to “do all” of Judaism – but no one is able to “do all” of anything perfectly, and this certainly doesn't stop people from trying. No one is able to play the piano flawlessly, but that doesn't stop people from learning how to play to the best of their ability. No one has visited every country in the world, but that doesn't discourage people from traveling. No one can say that he/she has been a perfect spouse or raised perfect children... I think you get the point.

Of course, Judaism isn't easy – but nothing valuable and gratifying ever is.

If we want our children to choose Judaism, we have to first choose it ourselves. We have to model for them what it means to be serious-minded Jews committed to growing in our Judaism. We must believe that when our children see the blessings, benefits and fulfillment that flow from a life centered in Judaism, there is every chance that they will follow our lead. However, our embrace of Judaism cannot be a tactic to make our children stay Jewish and marry Jewish – our involvement must be rooted in our personal commitment to our heritage and tradition because we value and cherish it.

I wish you success and fulfillment on your journey. If Jews for Judaism can be of any help along the way, please contact us.

JEWISH IQ TEST ANSWERS

- 1) **According to Christian tradition, Jesus' mother was Mary.**

The name of Moses' mother was Yocheved.

- 2) **Madonna has been one of the world's most popular entertainers for the past 30 years and is the top-selling female recording artist of all time.**

Chanah was the mother of the prophet Samuel who lived about 3,000 years ago. Her manner of praying became the model for the way Jews pray.

- 3) **The most famous books in the New Testament are the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The books of Romans, Galatians and Revelation are also well-known.**

The Talmud contains dozens of tractates (books). Some of them include Blessings, Shabbat, Sukkah, Megilah, Nazarite, Divorces, Vows, Idol Worship.

- 4) ***Das Kapital*** was written by Karl Marx.

A Guide to the Perplexed was written by Moses Maimonides.

- 5) **Nostradamus was a French seer who lived in the 16th century and published collections of prophecies that have become very famous. Some people believe these writings forecast historical events far into the future.**

Onkelos was a Roman convert to Judaism about 1,900 years ago. He composed the official Aramaic translation of the Torah that is studied to this day.

6) Many Christians believe that Jesus was born on December 25.

Jewish tradition records the birthday of Moses as the 7th of Adar.

7) A hat trick is accomplished when someone scores three goals in a hockey game. The term is sometimes used for similar accomplishments in other sports as well.

Siyum HaShas refers to the completion of the study of the six orders of the Talmud. (Shas is the Hebrew acronym for Sheesha Sedarim, six orders). The Talmud is composed of 2,711 pages. Many people throughout the world undertake the study of one page each day, and this allows them to complete the entire Talmud in 7½ years. This accomplishment is normally marked with large celebrations.

8) The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that the Deity is composed of three distinct “personalities” – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Taryag is a Hebrew acronym for the number 613 and it refers to the 613 laws of the Torah. This includes 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions.

9) Most of the Beatles’ songs were written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

According to Jewish tradition, King David composed most of the Psalms around 3,000 years ago.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rabbi Michael Skobac, Education Director and Senior Counselor for Jews for Judaism, Canada, was educated at Northwestern University and Yeshiva University. He has been involved in informal Jewish education and outreach work since 1975. Rabbi Skobac was the founding director of Kiruv, the campus outreach arm of the Rabbinical Council of America, and has worked as a campus professional with Hillel groups in Philadelphia, New York and Toronto. He has specialized in counter-missionary work since 1983, establishing the New York branch of Jews for Judaism and serving as a consultant to the New York Jewish Community Relations Council Task Force on Missionaries and Cults.

Rabbi Skobac has lectured extensively on missionaries and cults, as well as issues of Jewish continuity and spirituality across the United States, Canada, Israel, the Former Soviet Union, England, India, Australia and South Africa. He has acted as a consultant to communities worldwide in developing responses to missionary and cult activity and has extensive experience working with affected families and counseling people who have embraced Christianity. He has developed and taught numerous courses on Jewish-Christian polemics and has produced a highly acclaimed counter-missionary audio series entitled *The Counter-Missionary Survival Seminar*. Rabbi Skobac has written for a wide range of Jewish publications and regularly appears internationally on radio and television programs to share his expertise.

ABOUT JEWS FOR JUDAISM

JEW FOR JUDAISM is the only international organization exclusively dedicated to countering the multi-million dollar efforts of Christian missionary groups that target Jews, the impact of cults and eastern religions, and the growing rate of intermarriage that is devastating the Jewish community.

Our two primary goals are to strengthen Jewish pride and identity through preventive education and to win back vulnerable Jews who have been influenced by missionaries, cults, eastern religions and intermarriage.

JEWS FOR JUDAISM achieves its goals and promotes Jewish continuity through the following FREE educational programs, materials and counselling services that connect Jewish people to the spiritual depth, beauty and wisdom of Judaism and keeps Jews Jewish.

- 24-Hour Hotline
- Activism & Volunteers
- Advertising Campaigns
- Audio & Video Materials
- Books & Literature
- Campus Programs
- Conferences & Rallies
- Counter-Leafletting
- Crisis & Exit Counselling
- Facebook
- Internet Websites
- Lectures & Classes
- Library & Archives
- Monitoring Missionary & Cult Activity
- Outreach to Hebrew-Christians
- Referrals & Information
- Russian Outreach
- Shabbat Hospitality
- Speakers' Bureau
- TV & Radio Programs
- YouTube Video Channel

To date, over 350,000 Jews worldwide have participated in Jews for Judaism's successful educational programs and counselling services.

In an average year, Jews for Judaism (Canada) accomplishes the following through the generous help of concerned people like you:

- Provides 1,500 counselling sessions on missionary, cult & Jewish issues
- Presents lectures to 7,000 Jews, including youth, seniors and Russians
- Distributes 50,000 free pamphlets, books & audio materials
- Receives 200,000 visitors to www.jewsforjudaism.ca and other sites

Jews for Judaism unites the Jewish community in a common cause and has earned endorsements from a wide spectrum of Jewish agencies, rabbis and educators.

INTERMARRIAGE IS THERE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

Since the early 1960s, the rates of Jewish intermarriage have mushroomed, increasing tenfold. With extremely low birthrates and large numbers of Jewish people no longer identifying with the religion of Judaism – we are facing a grave demographic challenge.

Many people are uncomfortable talking, or even thinking, about intermarriage – but this won't make it go away. Many parents find it nearly impossible to convince their children that marrying within the faith is essential. Is there any hope for us?

With clarity and sensitivity, this booklet tackles the intermarriage issue head-on and shows that focusing the discussion on why Jews shouldn't intermarry is both misguided and ineffective.

The intermarriage issue must be seen in the broader context in which intermarriage is not the problem but the symptom of a larger, more critical issue. We can only see light at the end of the tunnel if we stay focused on this ultimate issue.

The booklet you are reading was written to help shed more light and less heat on our community's necessary conversation about intermarriage.

INTERMARRIAGE: IS THERE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL? is published by JEWS FOR JUDAISM, the only international organization dedicated to countering the multi-million dollar efforts of Christian missionary groups that target Jews, the impact of cults and eastern religions, and the growing rate of intermarriage that is devastating the Jewish community. To receive additional information, assistance for you or someone you know, or arrange a speaking engagement, contact us.

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