

Am Yisrael Chai!

# “Why The Jewish People Exist”

Lincoln Square Synagogue, Shvat 5784, Jan. 2024

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## Introduction

It was then [in 1967] that I knew that being Jewish was not something private and personal but something collective and historical. It meant being part of an extended family, many of whose members I did not know, but to whom I nonetheless felt connected by bonds of kinship and responsibility.

R Jonathan Sacks.

I can't seem to shake off the sense that we have returned to Jewish history, to saying "b'chol dor vador"—from generation to generation—they rise up against us....A teaching by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (known as the Rav) came to my mind that Shabbat, a piece of Torah that I have returned to every day since October 7. It is about Jewish peoplehood. The pain I felt in that moment was for the Jewish people, and I knew many others would be feeling the same, perhaps for the first time so acutely.

Mijal Bitton

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## RELIGION OR NATION?

Our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah  
Sa'adyah Gaon

"Though a Jew has sinned he is still a Jew"  
Talmud Sanhedrin. 44a

## ORIGINS

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵד-לֶךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֵרָאֶךְ:  
וְאָעֲשֶׂה לְגֹי גָדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְהָ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:  
וְאֶבְרַכְּהָ מִבְּרָכֶיךָ וּמִקִּלְלֶךָ אֲאָר וְנִבְרָכוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה:

Now the LORD said unto Abram: 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'

Genesis 12

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא פָּרַת ה' אֶת-אַבְרָם בְּרִית לֵאמֹר לְזָרְעֶךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת-הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת מִנְּהַר מִצְרַיִם עַד-הַנָּהָר הַגָּדוֹל נְהַר-פָּרַת:

In that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates;

Genesis 15

וְעַתָּה אִם-שָׁמָעַתָּ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים כִּי-לִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ:  
וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine;

and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.'

Exodus 19.

וְאַתֶּם-גַּם-זֹאת בְּהִיוֹתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבִיבֵיהֶם לֹא-מַאֲסִיתֶם וְלֹא-גַעַלְתֶּם לָכֵן לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹ-קֵיהֶם:  
וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית רִאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי-אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם לְהַזְכִּיר לָהֶם לֵאמֹר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי ה':

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And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 26

### The Descendants of Abraham?

Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in the congregation. The reason for this is, that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration; ... Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him. Thus Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism

Maimonides, Letter to Obadiah The Ger.

I am the One Whose Godliness suffices. Avraham had said to Hashem: "If I circumcise myself, people will regard me with disgust!" Hashem answered him: "I am the One Who said to My world: It suffices..." (Maharshal)

Siftei Chachamim.

### What Is "The Jewish People?"

אבל לפי הדברים אשר אמרנו לך לא יקשה כלל, כי אצל נח לא היה רק בחירה פרטי, והבחירה הפרטית הוא לפי מה שהוא, והכל הוא לפי מעשה צדקות שלו. אבל באברהם לא היה בחירה פרטית, רק באומה הישראלית, שהם זרעו.

וזה מפני כי אם אין כאן תורה, בטל חוק וסדר העולם מה שראוי לה להיות נוהג, וסדר שבטל מקצתו בטל כולו, כי לא שייך חצי סדר. ומאחר כי נתינת התורה הכרחי, כמו שהתבאר, ימשך אחר זה שבחר השם יתברך בישראל

Maharal Netzach Yisrael 11

[On the other hand,] if he performs one mitzvah, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others. This is implied by [Proverbs 10:25] "A righteous man is the foundation of the

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world," i.e., he who acted righteously, tipped the balance of the entire world to merit and saved it.

For these reasons, it is customary for all of Israel to give profusely to charity, perform many good deeds, and be occupied with mitzvot from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kippur to a greater extent than during the remainder of the year.

Maimonides Hil. Teshuva 3,3

And you will be a treasure among all peoples - even though all types of humans are important to me above all the lower beings, since He is represented only in them, as say Hazal (Avot): 'Humans are beloved because they were created in the Image' - still, you will be treasured among them...This will make you special for only you will be a kingdom of priests, by teaching and instructing all of mankind to call out in the name of G'd and for all to serve him together. This was to be a forerunner of what will happen in the distant future as predicted by the prophet Isaiah 61,6 "and you will be proclaimed 'priests' of the Lord." This is also the true meaning of *כי מציון תצא תורה*, "the Torah emanates from Zion." (Isaiah 2,3) [This statement is attributed to the nations of the world at that time.

Seforno

The theme of the Bible obviously is the story of the Jewish people, the children of Abraham and Sarah. The people of the covenant. The people whose name is Israel. It is about a particular people. One people in particular. However, as you know, the Bible doesn't begin there. How does it begin? It begins with an anomaly, a thing that doesn't seem to make any sense if we are trying to tell the story of one particular family. It begins not with a people in particular, but with humanity as a whole. It begins with those archetypal characters of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Babel and its builders.

So what I am telling you here is the second point. That Judaism is telling us something very profound. That as we move from the universal to the particular, from things in general to this thing, this person, we are moving from the inhuman to the human; from the impersonal to the personal; from the world of science to the world of humanity. If that is true, then God must love not universality but particularity: the thing that makes you different from me; or our faith different from someone else's faith.

The world chooses the strong. God in His wisdom knew, He chose the people who knew themselves, the *lo bechayil, velo beko'ach, ki im beruchi*. That we don't survive on strength or power but by God's spirit. I have to tell you, it says in the Torah that Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God. - We know

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why God chose Noah. None of those words are used in the context of Abraham. None of them.

God chooses whom the world rejects. He chooses the marginal, the nomads, the few, the young. People who, whether in their own land, from then to today, to live in Israel is to live in a tiny country surrounded by big empires at the juncture of three continents. Israel always was a tiny people surrounded by big neighbours.

Secondly, in the Dispersion, we were a minority – disempowered and scattered through the world. It is the people who are vulnerable, who are exposed, who are at risk. On them, God shows His special love. That is why the treatment of the Jews in history has always been a litmus test of the humanity of any age. It is why the Jewish story has always been a great narrative of hope because it is the story. And that is why it spoke to the founding fathers of America who were trying to set up something against the British. Why it spoke to the Black civil rights activists who were trying to create a space for themselves in America. Because the Jewish story was always of a people who were vulnerable, small, weak, exposed, afraid – and yet who never lost hope. And, as a result, never ceased to be.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

## End

Moses' hands remained steady—steadfast, committed (emunah)—until the sun set. That day, these Jews who had just escaped their chains were able to triumph against a malevolent enemy. They did so because they were united, because they were one body. Some took up arms in battle. Moses held up his actual arms, and others held up Moses's arms. Their pain was shared, but each had a unique role to play.

Mijal Bitton.

Uniquely, Jews are born into a faith. It chooses us before we choose it. Physically we come naked into the world, but spiritually we come with a gift: the story of our past, of our parents and theirs through almost forty centuries from the day Abraham and Sarah first heard the call of God and began their journey to a land, a promise, a destiny and a vocation. That story is ours.

R Jonathan Sacks.