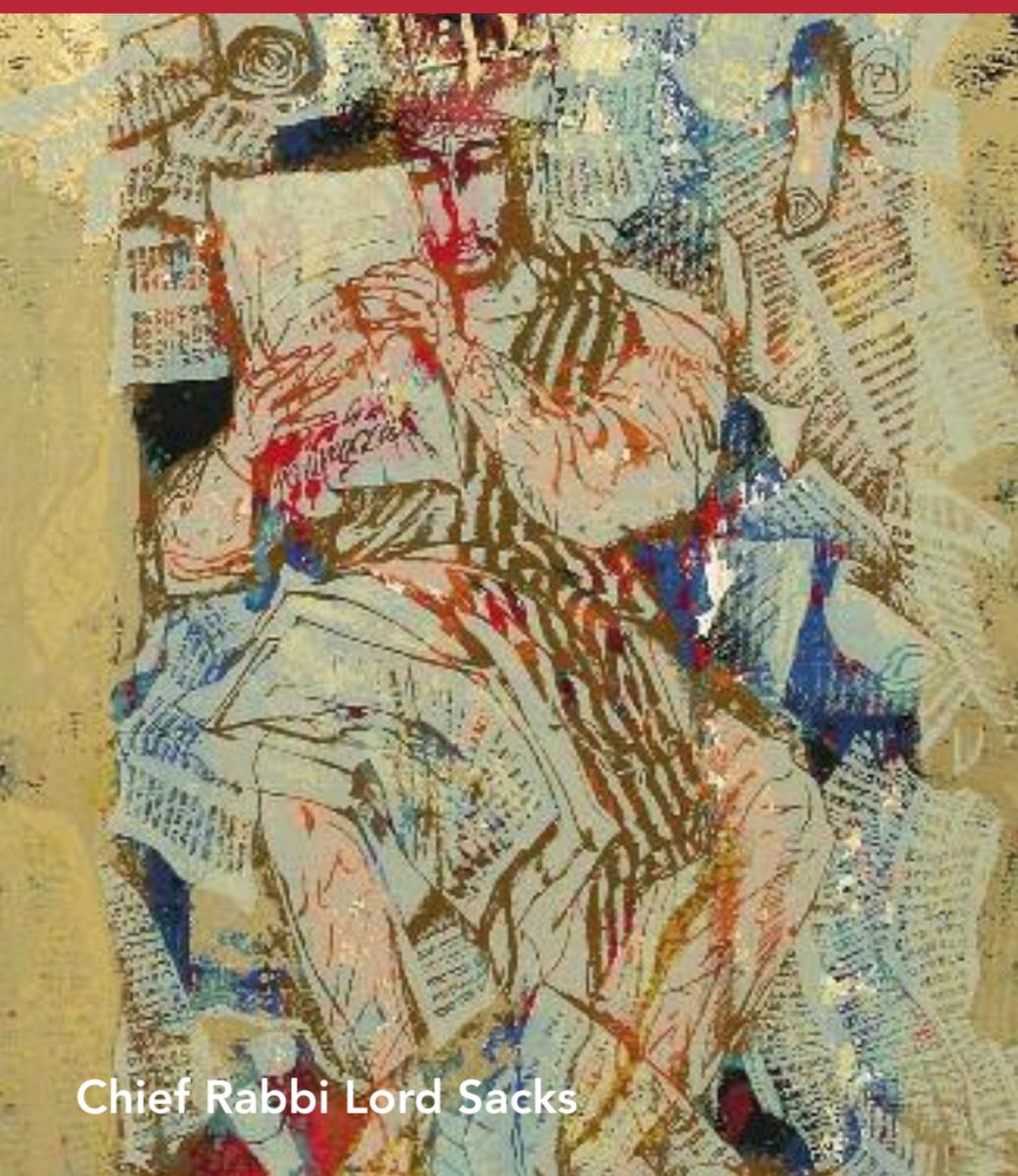


# LETTERS TO THE NEXT GENERATION 2

REFLECTIONS ON JEWISH LIFE



Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks

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## Introduction

*The booklet is dedicated in memory of*

*Susi and Fred Bradfield ז"ל*

*who, in their lifetime, instilled in their children  
and grandchildren a deep love of Judaism  
and the importance of its values.*

*Their commitment to Judaism,  
the Jewish people and to Israel  
has remained an inspiration to their family  
and to all who knew them.*

*Their lives were "letters to the next generation".  
May their memory always be for a blessing.*

*Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of days, is a time when we do more than confess and seek atonement for our sins. It's the supreme day of Teshuvah, which means "returning, coming home." To come home we have to ask who we are and where we truly belong. It is a day when we reaffirm our identity.*

*There were times when this was high drama. Periodically, from Visigoth Spain in the seventh century to Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth, Jews were confronted with the choice: Convert or be expelled. Sometimes it was: Convert or die. Most did not convert but some did. They were known in Hebrew as anusim (people who acted under pressure), and in Spanish as conversos or (as a term of abuse) marranos. Outwardly they behaved as if they were Christians or Muslims but secretly they kept their faith as Jews.*

*Once a year, at great risk, they would make their way to the synagogue as their way of saying, "A Jew I am and a Jew I will remain." This may explain the prayer before Kol Nidrei, giving permission to pray with "transgressors" (abaryanim). It may also be why Kol Nidrei became so deeply engraved in the Jewish heart, because of the tears of those who asked God to forgive them for vows they had taken through fear of death. On Yom Kippur even the most estranged Jew came home.*

Today, thankfully, Jews are under no such threat. But being Jewish hasn't always been easy in the contemporary world, not just because of antisemitism and attacks on Israel but also because the whole thrust of our culture has little time for religious faith. So I have written this little book hoping it will help you answer some of the questions you may be asking as you reflect on how you will live in the year to come. I've written it in the form of letters to two Jewish students. They aren't actual people, but their questions are those I'm most often asked.

Writing it, I've held in mind the memory of four very special people: the late Susi and Fred Bradfield, whose lives were a sustained tutorial in Jewish commitment and generosity; the late Marc Weinberg, one of the leaders of his generation, who died in Israel last year at the age of 35; and my late mother Libby who died on the first night of Sukkot 5771, to whom I and my brothers owe so much. May their memories be a blessing.

May God be with you and the Jewish people in the coming year. May He forgive us our failings, heed our prayers and write us in the Book of Life.

Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks  
Tishri 5772

## Letter 1: A belated reply

DEAR RUTH, DEAR MICHAEL, you've been writing to me from time to time over the past year and somehow I was always too busy to reply. But now, as the holy days are approaching I feel guilty at not having taken the time. So, belatedly, I'm writing back.

I don't know if you know one another, but I know that you are both at university, both thinking about what lies ahead: for you, for Jews, for humanity. From your letters and many others I receive, I know that you are both concerned about the hostility to Israel on campus. You fear a return of antisemitism. You wonder what the future holds for Israel and for Jews.

You have deep 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 a 9/11 or the Japanese earthquake? 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?

Besides which, you tell me you are underwhelmed by what you experience of Jewish life. You find synagogue services boring. The rituals of Judaism leave you unmoved and perplexed. If Pesach is about freedom, Shabbat about rest, Yom Kippur about feeling sorry for the wrong we do, why so many laws? Why not just focus on the essentials?

You put it very well, Ruth. You said that Judaism sometimes seems to you like one of those large packages that arrives in the post. You open it and find that most of it is foam wrapping and the object inside is actually very small. Why does Judaism need to surround itself with so much protective packaging?

I will try to answer these questions as best I can, though time is short, yours and mine. But first I want to try to answer the question you haven't asked but which I feel is there, just below the surface. For what you are really asking is why be Jewish? Why stay Jewish? Why live a Jewish life? How does it help you be the person you want to be?

Why when the pressures are so great, of finding a job, keeping a job, handling all the demands on your time, spend that time on a faith you find difficult and a way of life you find uninspiring? Why bother? That is the first question. From it all else follows. Tomorrow I will try to write you an answer.

## Letter 2: A historian's honour

DEAR RUTH, DEAR MICHAEL, I said yesterday that I would try to give you an answer to the question why stay Jewish. There are many answers, and to understand them is the work of a lifetime. But we have to start somewhere and probably the more unexpected the starting point, the better.

Like you I studied at university, so I knew vaguely about an eccentric Oxford don, a historian and a writer about English literature. He was a Fellow of All Souls, which meant that he was one of the brightest minds of his generation.

His name was A. L. Rowse and he was best known for his theory about the identity of the "dark lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets. He died in 1997, and shortly before that, in 1995, he published a book called *Historians I Have Known*. I was reading it one day and I came to the last page.

There – it was the penultimate sentence of the book – I came across a remark that left me open mouthed with amazement. Nothing had prepared me for it. A. L. Rowse was not Jewish and as far as I know he had no connection with Jews other than those he knew at university.

This is what he wrote. "If there is any honour in all the world that I should like, it would be to be an honorary Jewish

citizen.” What an extraordinary remark from a wise man nearing the end of his life, reflecting on all that life, especially history, had taught him.

The British know about honours. So I could understand an Oxford don who had written over a hundred books admitting that a medal, an award, a knighthood would not go amiss. But “to be an honorary Jewish citizen” and to count that not just as an honour, but the *one above all* he would like to have – that was an extraordinary thing to say.

Why did he say it? I never met him. I did not know anyone who had. And by the time I read the book he was no longer alive. So I can only speculate.

Was it that Jews more than any other people in history cared about learning, education and the life of the mind? That they had contributed, vastly out of proportion to their numbers, many of the greatest intellects of the modern world?

Was it that they were the first monotheists, the first to believe in a God who transcended the universe, creating it in forgiveness and love, making humanity in His image and endowing us with a dignity no other faith has ever equalled?

Was it that they had survived for so long – twice as long as Christianity, three times as long as Islam – and under some of the most adverse conditions ever experienced by a people? Was it, given that Rowse was a historian, the fact that Jews were the first historians, the first to see God in history, the first even to think in terms of history?

Was it, given that he was a writer on literature, the fact that the Hebrew Bible is the greatest work of literature ever written? Was it the vision of Moses, the poetry of psalms, the social conscience of Amos, the hope of Isaiah, the wisdom

of Ecclesiastes, the passion of the Song of Songs? Or that Jews had given humanity its most basic moral concepts: free will, responsibility, justice and the rule of law, *chesed* and the rule of compassion, *tzedakah* and the principle of equity?

Who knows? But I know this – that if they offered to make you a dame, Ruth, or a knight, Michael, you wouldn't refuse. You wouldn't consider it trivial or irrelevant. But if Rowse was right, it turns out that you have already been given an honour greater than these. Don't forget it or give it away.

## Letter 3: Great expectations

Dear Rabbi, could you explain this a little more fully?  
Being Jewish doesn't feel like an honour to me.  
Yours, Ruth.

RUTH, sometimes we lack perspective. Think of sitting in a car in a traffic jam. Your view of the road ahead is obscured by the car in front. Now think of how the scene would seem different if you were in an airplane looking down. You could see not just the road but the whole vast landscape. Caught in the thick of Jewish life, down here on the ground so to speak, we do not always see its beauty, its grandeur, its spiritual passion and moral power.

I gave the example yesterday of A. L. Rowse. On another occasion I was reading a book about inflation by the economist and former editor of *The Times*, William Rees-Mogg, when – again with no obvious connection to the subject at hand – I came across this sentence. “One of the gifts of Jewish culture to Christianity is that it has taught Christians to think like Jews. 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.”

Nietzsche, not normally thought of as a philosemite, wrote: “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.”

Winston Churchill said: “Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are beyond question the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world.”

These people were telling us something from a distance that we – sitting in our metaphorical traffic jam – don't always see. We see the road but not the landscape; the car in front of us but not the open space half a mile ahead.

Judaism really was world-changing. Two other religions – Christianity and Islam – borrowed from it and became the faith of more than half the seven billion people alive today. A huge proportion of shapers of the modern mind were Jewish at least by lineage, from Marx, Freud and Einstein to Sergey Brin of Google and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook.

Judaism has been like a sun sending out rays in all directions while remaining in itself the source. Why? What was the source of its power? And how does that have to do with us, with you and me, here, now?

The answer, I think, is that we tend to become what we believe. Experiments have repeatedly shown that when teachers have high expectations of their students, the students go on to do well. When they have low expectations, the students do badly.

No religion, no culture, no civilisation has ever had higher expectations of the human person than Judaism – and that applies to you and me.

We are each, says the Torah, created in the image and likeness of God, gifted with the freedom and blessed by the

intellect He has given us. One life, said the sages, is like a universe. Destroy a life and you destroy a universe. Save a life and you save a universe. We are called on to be, says the Talmud, God's partners in the work of creation. Every individual, says Maimonides, should see him- or herself and the world as evenly poised between good and evil, so that our next act may tilt the balance of our life and the very fate of life itself.

Though some of these ideas were later borrowed by others – by Christianity, Islam, even secular philosophy – no group has ever believed them so deeply or lived out their implications so consistently.

Jews have had an influence out of all proportion to their numbers, because they believed in the individual and his or her power to change the world for the better. Believing that God had high expectations of them, they did great things.

*If I had the choice of all the cultures in the world, I would still choose the one that had the highest expectations of what an individual can achieve in a lifetime.* That is why I consider it an honour to be a Jew.

## *Letter 4: The pursuit of happiness*

Dear Rabbi, I read your reply to Ruth, but how would that actually make a difference to my life? Why should I live differently in the future because of the way Jews lived in the past? Michael.

**M**ICHAEL, you are about to begin your journey into the wide world of earning a living and making a life. When making your choices, remember this: *We are as big as the ideals by which we live.* We have only one life to live, so we had better choose those ideals carefully. And the ideals on offer in today's culture are very small indeed – not all but most.

What a strange world it is in which we value people by what they earn or what they own, the clothes they wear, the cars they drive, the houses they live in and the holidays they take. These things are not unimportant. One great rabbi, the third century sage known as Rav, said, "In the world to come we will have to give an account of every legitimate pleasure we denied ourselves in this life." Judaism is as un-puritanical a religion as it is possible to be.

But this is the gift-wrapping of life, not life itself. I studied philosophy at university, but the deepest philosophy lessons I ever learned came from attending Jewish funerals. That's

when we face the truth about what makes a life worthwhile. We catch a glimpse of what lives on after us, what people will remember us for, what difference we make in this brief span of years that is all God gives us.

No one ever delivered a *hesped*, a funeral oration, saying: “Mr X. What a man he was. He drove a Lamborghini, dressed in Armani, wore a Patek-Philippe, had a villa in Cap Ferrat and a pied-a-terre in Mayfair. This was a giant. We shall not see his like again.” We know that a speech like that would be mad.

Let me let you into a secret. There are good reasons why the world wants us to live our lives for the wrong reasons. If no one worried what they wore, if all they cared about in a car was whether it gets you from A to B, if they ate simple food that just happens to be good for you, if they were more interested in serving others than having others at great expense serve them, economists would panic.

We would be healthier and happier, there would be less envy, competition and strife, and we would work less hard with less stress and more time to enjoy life. Meanwhile advertisers would be out of a job, manufacturers would suffer a slump in demand, businesspeople would warn of the risk of recession, and retailers tell shareholders of lower profits and reduced dividends. So, for the sake of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, we make ourselves unhappy.

Somewhere in our souls, Michael, we have to create space for a voice of sanity that is so easy to miss among the emails and texts and tweets, the noise and bustle and relentless pressure that is making slaves of us all while telling us that we are the most fortunate generation that ever lived, having

witnessed Steve Jobs descending the mountain, holding in his hands the two tablets, iPad 1 and iPad 2, on which are written the sacred words that you can download in less than a minute and read in a choice of fonts.

We have to make space for the things that really matter: relationships, marriage, the family, being part of a community, celebrating, giving thanks, being part of a tradition and its wisdom, a faith and its blessings, giving to others and sharing with them our joys and grief.

There has to be room in life for something bigger than us, larger than self-interest and longer than a lifetime. There are times when we have to let the soul sing, to express gratitude and know that what we have is God’s gift. That’s what living Jewishly does. It structures our lives around the things that matter – the things that are important but not urgent, and therefore tend to be neglected until it is too late. Don’t leave it too late.

For this is what Judaism shows us: how to take hold of life with both hands and make a blessing over it. That is what distinguishes happiness from mere pleasure, and gives meaning to our years and days.

## Letter 5: *A life that matters*

Can you give me an example of what you mean by making a blessing over life? Yours, Ruth.

**D**ID YOU EVER HEAR the story, Ruth, 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 Hashanah 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.

## *Letter 6: The moral voice*

**I can understand the difference Judaism makes at home, or in synagogue, or among friends, but how will it make a difference to the way I pursue my career?  
Michael.**

**B**Y HELPING YOU to do the right and the good, Michael. We’ve been shaken by scandals involving bankers, 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, Michael? 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 7: The greatness of smallness*

**But why me, Rabbi? There are other Jews. They will keep the tradition going. Why me? Ruth.**

**R**UTH, I know the difficulties you feel, the challenges you face, the problems you find in Jewish life today. We can talk about these in the days ahead. But I would not have done my duty had I not made it as clear as I can that we need you and the world needs us.

There are not many Jews in the world today. We represent less than a fifth of a per cent of the population of the world. For every Jew alive today there are 100 Muslims and 183 Christians. We are a tiny people. We always were. Moses said so, 3,300 years ago. “Not because you are numerous did God love you or choose you, because you are the smallest of all nations” (Deuteronomy 7:7).

I’ve often wondered about this. Why are we so small? One reason, of course, is the history of Jewish persecution, of which the Holocaust was the greatest but by no means the only tragedy. Many Jews died because of their faith.

Another reason, and a good one, is that we never sought to convert the world. Had we done so, there would be more Jews. But we believed and still do, that you don’t have to be

Jewish to encounter God or get to heaven. That is one of Judaism’s most beautiful beliefs. In this global age with its multi-faith societies, the sooner we recognise the integrity of other sources of wisdom and virtue the better.

But there’s a third reason, and it’s hinted at in a strange story in the eighth chapter of the book of Judges. It’s set more than 3,000 years ago, in the days before there was a king in Israel. God tells Gideon, the charismatic Jewish leader at the time, to go and fight the Midianites, who have been attacking Israel.

Gideon assembles an army of 32,000 soldiers. “Too many,” says God. “Tell everyone who wants to, to go home.” 22,000 do so. Now he has only 10,000 men. “Still too many,” says God. He tells Gideon to take them to the river, see how they drink water, and send home all those who bend down to drink. 9,700 do so, and he sends them home. Now there are only 300 left, a ridiculously small number with which to fight a war. “Now go and fight,” he tells Gideon. They do, and they win. Somewhere in that story lies the secret of Jewish smallness.

Through the story of the Jews God is telling the world that a nation need not be big to be great. Small groups can make a large difference. Which is why Jews have contributed to most fields of human endeavour out of all proportion to their numbers.

But that places an enormous responsibility on each of us. The future of Judaism is in our hands, Ruth, and to a people as small as ours, every life makes a significant difference. Every loss is a tragedy.

Don’t leave. Don’t give up. Don’t abandon your faith, your people, your history, your heritage. Stay and contribute.

Stay and argue. Stay and bring the Jewish world a little closer to what it ought to be. If it really is, as A. L. Rowse thought it was, an honour to be a Jew, wear that honour with pride and show it to be an honour by the way you live.

## *Letter 8: Faith*

Dear Rabbi, I'll grant you all the beautiful things you say about Judaism. But aren't they all irrelevant? Judaism is a religion, and religion has been replaced by science. We don't need to believe in God anymore. When faith made sense, Judaism made sense. But now, it doesn't make sense at all. Sincerely, Michael.

**D**EAR 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 theocratic 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 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 them "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 long as there are humans on earth. Faith is the answer to the questions that will remain even when all the science has been done.

## *Letter 9: The dignity of purpose*

What makes you convinced that those questions have an answer? Perhaps life has no meaning. That's what the Greek philosopher Epicurus thought. It's what Bertrand Russell thought. It's what today's atheists think. The universe just exists. We just exist. There is no reason. Why should we think otherwise? Michael.

**B**ECAUSE, Michael, humans have always lifted their eyes beyond the visible horizon. That is what led Columbus and Vasco de Gama to embark on their voyages of discovery. It's what led Newton to lay the foundations of science and Descartes to set out the agenda of modern philosophy. Humans – real humans who think – are never satisfied with the answer, “It just is.” Why does the universe exist? It just does. Why are we here? We just are. How then shall we live? As we choose. – That isn't thought, Michael, but the premature termination of thought.

Nothing suggests that the universe suddenly sprang into being 13.7 billion years ago for no reason and at random. Scientists have shown that it is almost impossibly finely tuned for the emergence of life. The entire structure of the universe is determined by six mathematical constants which, had they

varied by a billionth or trillionth degree, would have resulted in no universe at all. Had the force of gravity been slightly different, for example, the universe would either have expanded or imploded in such a way as to preclude the formation of stars or planets.

This does not prove that “In the beginning God created . . .” But the only other hypothesis that would explain how we came to be is that there is an infinite number of parallel universes, one of which – ours – just happened to be amenable to life. My view is that if one universe spontaneously coming into being is hard to understand, an infinity of self-igniting universes is even harder to understand.

Imagine this: There is an infinity of universes, only one of which has the precise parameters ours has, making it amenable to life. Within that one universe – ours – there are a hundred billion galaxies, each containing on average a hundred billion stars, yet ours is the only one known to us that gave rise to life. Within the three million species of life thus known, only one – *Homo sapiens* – is capable of self-conscious thought, capable, that is, of asking the question “Why?” And only if there is a life-form capable of asking the question “Why?” is something in the universe conscious that there is a universe. Am I to suppose that all this happened by accident? That it just happened, period?

No: The simplest and most elegant hypothesis is the one Judaism introduced into the world long ago, that the universe was created by the God of love and forgiveness, who brought us into being in love and forgiveness, commanding us to love and forgive others.

Who, then, am I? The image of God. Why am I here? To sanctify life. How then shall I live? By the principles and laws God has taught us.

The universe is not as ancient polytheists and today's atheists believe, a meaningless clash of primal forces, each indifferent to the fact that we exist. We and the universe are here because Someone wanted us to be – One who lifts us when we fall, forgives us when we fail, who gave us the very freedom that makes humanity distinct from every other life form known to us, and who invites us to become His partners in the work of creation.

It is this belief alone that rescues life from meaninglessness, nihilism and despair. It is true that there are people who sincerely believe that life as a whole is meaningless. You mentioned some of them. Another was my doctoral supervisor, the late Sir Bernard Williams, one of the most brilliant men I ever met. And it is true that we cannot resolve the disagreement either way, by scientific evidence or logical proof.

But all the great truths of life are like that. You cannot prove that it is better to trust than to be perennially suspicious, or that it is worth taking the risk of love and the commitment of marriage, or that it makes sense to bring children into the world, or that you should be generous and forgiving, or that you should live by altruism rather than by narrow self-interest.

Some people are unmoved by any of these ideals, just as there are people who do not see any meaning in life beyond fleeting pleasures and the certainty of death. For that matter there are people who live without music or a sense of humour

or hope. But surely we would agree that such lives are foreshortened, impoverished in some way.

The historian Paul Johnson once wrote: “No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny.” Jews, he says, “stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.” That is the truth at the heart of our faith.

## Letter 10: *A nation of iconoclasts*

I was interested in what you wrote to Michael, but surely all monotheists believe what we believe. What makes Judaism different? Yours, Ruth.

GOOD QUESTION, Ruth. One answer was given by Jeremiah in a line we say on Rosh Hashana: “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, Ruth, is what we are.

## *Letter 11: Faith after the Holocaust*

**But how can you really believe after the Holocaust, when Jews cried out and Heaven was silent? When one and a half million innocent children were murdered, merely because their grandparents were Jews? How can anyone believe in God after that? Yours, Michael.**

**M**ICHAEL, that is the question of questions. But the truth is that I have known many Holocaust survivors. They have become my friends, my mentors. They are among the strongest and most life-affirming people I have ever met.

How they survived, seeing what they saw, knowing what they know, I have no idea. Yet in all the years, not one of them ever asked me, "Where was God at Auschwitz?" Some undoubtedly lost their faith in those years, some kept it and some regained it in the course of time. Some never did believe, not then, not now.

But the question, "Where was God?" was not born in the Holocaust. It was born the day Cain, the first human child, killed his brother Abel. God warned Cain beforehand, but He did not stop him. Why not? The answer, and it is a tough answer, is that God does not stop people doing what they have chosen to do. Without that there would be no freedom.

The universe would be a vast prison camp. God isn't like that. A large part of the Hebrew Bible is the story of God's disappointment at what we have done with the freedom He gave us. But He does not take it back.

Now let me be candid. The Holocaust creates, for me, a continuing crisis of faith which gets deeper the more I read about it. How, after Auschwitz, can any of us ever again have faith, not in God but – in humanity?

The Holocaust did not take place long ago and far away. It happened less than a century ago in the heart of post-religious, enlightened, rationalist Europe: in the land, nation and culture that produced Goethe, Schiller, Mozart, Beethoven, Kant and Hegel, that claimed to have reached a new peak in human civilisation.

Nor was it carried out by uneducated masses. More than a half of those who sat together at Wannsee in January 1942 and planned the "Final Solution," the extermination of all of Europe's 11 million Jews, carried the title "Doctor." They were either medical doctors or had doctorates.

Heidegger, the greatest German philosopher of the twentieth century, was an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party, betrayed his Jewish colleagues and students, and never, after the war, expressed remorse for what he had done. Scientists, lawyers, judges, doctors and academics all played their part in the extermination of the Jews and almost none registered a protest.

Not one of the disciplines claimed to be expressive of the new humanism acted as a barrier to inhumanity. Science proved no protection: the racial antisemitism born in Germany in the late nineteenth century was based on

two so-called sciences, Social Darwinism and the "Scientific Study of Race." The former argued that societies evolved the way species did, by the strong ruthlessly eliminating the weak. The latter, a mix of biology and anthropology, held that humans are divided into different races, each with its own ineliminable characteristics. Thus Blacks, Jews and others are inferior species. We now know both were wrong, but in those days they were part of the scientific consensus.

Philosophy was no protection. At his trial, Adolf Eichmann proved himself to be a disciple of Kantian ethics. Indeed many of Europe's greatest philosophers, among them Voltaire, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, together with Kant himself, expressed sentiments that were blatantly antisemitic.

The arts were no protection. We know that a string quartet played classical music in Auschwitz-Birkenau as one and a quarter million men, women and children were gassed, burned and turned to ash. Civilisation failed to civilise. The humanities did not prevent inhumanity.

Even today some of the world's most famous atheists are intolerant, abrasive, insensitive to human dignity, incapable of listening to views opposed to their own – not necessarily people I would trust to create a world of freedom and compassion.

It is not easy to have faith after Auschwitz. The Klausenberger Rav, Rabbi Yekutiel Halberstam, who lived through several extermination camps, once said, "The real miracle is that we who survived the Holocaust still have faith. That, my friends, is the greatest miracle of all."

Job, in the book that bears his name, said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.” Faith does not mean that, whatever we do, things will turn out fine. The freedom God gave us includes among other things the freedom to destroy ourselves. Freedom honours our humanity only if accompanied by responsibility. Faith is God’s call to responsibility. God does not save us from ourselves. God teaches us how to save ourselves from ourselves.

The way He did so was simple. He taught us, at the beginning of the Torah, the book that was His greatest gift to us, that every human being, regardless of colour, class or creed, is in God’s own image, after His own likeness. Meaning: life is sacred.

Sacred. That is a religious word. I do not know any secular word that has the same moral force, the same power to cut through all sophisticated rationalizations. After the Holocaust we need God more than ever. For there is no limit to the evil men may do when they no longer believe that anything is sacred.

## *Letter 12: Sacred discontent*

**B**UT THERE’S MORE. 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.” 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.

## Letter 13: Prayer

Rabbi, explain prayer to me. To me it seems either wish-fulfilment or make-believe to think that because we say certain words, the world is going to change. Life isn't like that, and we know it isn't. So what is prayer if not belief in magic or mystery? Sorry to be so blunt, but that's what I feel. Ruth.

**I**F WE THINK OF PRAYER as a way of changing God's mind, then you are right, Ruth. 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 *Birkot 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. 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, 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.

## Letter 14: *On ritual*

You have told us about Judaism's great ideas. But how does that connect with the sheer detail of Judaism, the complex of laws about what we may eat and what not, what we are allowed to do on Shabbat and what is forbidden, the 613 commandments and all the rest. Isn't Judaism in danger of losing the wood for the trees, the grand design in the multiplicity of rules and regulations?  
Yours, Ruth.

LET ME RECOMMEND to you, Ruth, the spate of recent books from Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* to Matthew Syed's *Bounce*, 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 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 Berkshire. 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, Ruth: 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. The sexual ethic of Judaism trains us to keep check on our libido, helping us to avoid the sexual harassment that wrecks the lives of its victims and brings great careers crashing to the ground. Each of Judaism's “thou shalt not's” 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.

## *Letter 15: Serving God is hard work*

Are you serious, Rabbi? Can keeping Shabbat, or kashrut, or the laws of mikveh, really change our personality? Ruth.

**Y**ES, I AM ABSOLUTELY SERIOUS. I was once asked by the novelist Howard Jacobson why Judaism seemed so obsessed by details. Caught off-guard I didn't ask him the obvious question. "Howard, how do you write a novel that wins the Booker Prize?"

The answer, as any novelist will tell you, is hard work. You have to write every day (except Shabbat and Yom Tov) whether you feel like it or not. You have to turn writing into a ritual. And you have to worry endlessly about the details. Is this character convincing? Does the dialogue fit? Does the plot creak at this point or that? There is no great achievement in any field without ritual, routine and attention to detail almost to the point of obsession. Genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration.

*The same applies to matters of the spirit.* It was Judaism's greatness to understand this simple truth. Some people think faith is like talent: either you have it or you don't. But even talent is not like that: that is the point of all those recent

books I mentioned in my last email. Judaism says we are all capable of spiritual greatness. Moses Maimonides even says in his law code (Laws of Repentance 5:2): "Anyone can be as righteous as Moses." But for that, you have to work at it as hard as Moses did. Not accidentally did Judaism call serving God *Avodah*, which means, "hard work."

In truth, *nowhere does hard work bring more blessings than in the life of the spirit.* Here's a thought experiment, Ruth. You are just about to accept a job with one firm when a rival firm comes to you and says, "We will pay you double, on one condition: that you never read a book, listen to a piece of music, watch a play or film, or have a conversation unrelated to your work. You see, we want you to give one hundred per cent of your concentration to your job."

Would you accept? Obviously not. You don't have to be Jewish to know that whatever price you are offered, do not sell your soul. Better, said John Stuart Mill, to be Socrates dissatisfied than to be a fool satisfied. Spiritual pleasures are the highest of all. They are what make us human. And no faith, no civilisation worked harder at the life of the spirit than Judaism with its multiplicity of commands and its intricacy of detail.

And it changes lives in the most extraordinary ways. Here are three simple examples. First: still today, Jews give to charity out of all proportion to their numbers. That is a habit born and sustained for more than three thousand years since the ancient laws of tithes, and corners of the field, and forgotten sheaves, and the remission of debts every seven years, and all the other forms of *tzedakah*, charity, so central to Jewish life.

Second: even secular Jews cherish study, scholarship and the life of the mind. Think of the great Jewish intellects of the modern world: in physics Einstein, in sociology Durkheim, in anthropology Levi-Strauss, in philosophy Isaiah Berlin, in literature Proust, Kafka, Bashevis Singer, Agnon, Bellow and Roth; 22 per cent of all Nobel prizes in the twentieth century, 49 per cent of world chess masters, and this from a population numbering 0.2 per cent of the population of the world – a disproportion of more than a hundred times. As Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, once put it: “We came from one of those Russian Jewish families where you expected even the plumber to have a Ph. D.” Where did this come from if not from a religion that made study, *talmud Torah*, a religious duty even higher than prayer?

Third: Jews were distinguished throughout history for having exceptionally strong families. Where did this come from if not from the structure of Jewish law that sanctifies the home, cherishes the love between husband and wife, parent and child, and invests everything to do with marriage with the charisma of holiness?

Judaism transforms Jews – so much so that even Jews several generations removed from religious practice still carry with them the habits of the heart and disciplines of the mind that were born and sustained in the life of the commandments. They are living off inherited capital. But it's always better to make your own spiritual wealth and teach your children how to do so. Which means Judaism and its daily disciplines.

## Letter 16: Antisemitism returns

Rabbi, let me change the subject if I may. Why has antisemitism returned? Surely if there was one thing on which everyone agreed after the Holocaust, it was “Never again.” But now it seems more like “Ever again.” This really troubles me. Yours, Michael.

THIS is one of the most serious questions of our time. Let's first step back and consider what antisemitism is. It is not a coherent doctrine. In the nineteenth century Jews were hated because they were rich and because they were poor; because they were capitalists and because they were communists; because they kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere. Voltaire hated them because they believed in an ancient, to him superstitious, faith. Stalin hated them because they were “rootless cosmopolitans” who believed nothing.

Antisemitism is not a belief. It is a sickness and one that has little to do with Jews. Let me explain. The world is constantly changing, and change is very hard for people to bear, especially when they experience it as a form of loss. The easiest way of coping with it is to blame someone else. In the wilderness the Israelites did this to Moses. The fact that he

had liberated them from slavery was irrelevant. They accused him of bringing them out into the desert to die.

Blame is a sickness and a very dangerous one. It defines you as a victim. It absolves you from responsibility. It allows you to say that the problems you are experiencing are someone else's fault, and were it not for them you would not now be suffering. This is false and ultimately self-destructive, but it is a comforting thing to believe.

Who then do you blame? Someone who is [a] close enough to be a plausible candidate, [b] different enough to be not like you, and [c] harmless or weak or forgiving enough for it not to be dangerous to blame them. No one blames those they genuinely fear.

For centuries Jews filled that role in Christian Europe. They were religiously different. In the nineteenth century they were deemed to be racially different. Today they fulfil that role in an Islamic Middle East. They are not Arab. They are not Muslim. They are different.

Antisemitism is a projection, and is caused not by Jews but by internal conflicts in the societies that give rise to it. Today the Middle East, and to some degree Europe, are riven by conflict. The world is changing, economically, politically and technologically almost faster than people can bear. So they search for someone to blame. It can be the West; it can be America; or it can be the Jews. Since Jews are smaller and weaker than the West or America, it usually lands up being them.

A thousand years of Christian and European antisemitism gave rise to a long series of myths, from the Blood Libel to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. After the Holocaust people

began to realise how murderous these falsehoods were, and by and large Europe was cured of them.

The trouble is that by then Europe had infected the Middle East with just these myths. The Blood Libel was taken to Egypt and Syria by Coptic and Maronite Christians in the early nineteenth century. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was taken by the Mufti of Jerusalem direct from Nazi Germany. These myths are alive and well today and have been broadcast by Egyptian and Syrian television as well as other official and influential media.

Antisemitism is a deadly doctrine. It endangers Jews. But it also ultimately destroys antisemitic societies themselves. The reason should be obvious. When you blame others and define yourself as a victim, you abdicate responsibility for solving your own problems. That is why medieval Christendom, Nazi Germany, Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union – massive powers in their day – died from internal decay. You cannot build a viable religion, society or identity on prejudice. Hate endangers the hated but it destroys the hater.

In the last month of his life, Moses gave the Israelites an unusual command. He said, "Do not hate an Egyptian for you were strangers in his land" (Deuteronomy 23:8). What did he mean? The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites and tried to kill every male child. Was that a reason not to hate them? Surely the opposite was the case.

What Moses was doing was very profound. He was telling the next generation that if they continued to hate Egyptians, they would still be slaves – to the past, to resentment, to a sense of grievance. Moses would have taken the Israelites out

of Egypt but he would not have taken Egypt out of the Israelites. He was stating one of the deepest truths of all: *If you want to be free, you have to let go of hate.*

That is a message we must insist on at every opportunity. Antisemitism matters not because Jews are Jews but because Jews are human. You cannot deny someone else's humanity without endangering your own.

## *Letter 17: The assault on Israel*

**Rabbi, do you see criticism of Israel, of the kind we are experiencing on campus today, as antisemitism? Ruth.**

**W**E MUST BE VERY CAREFUL, Ruth, not to use words lightly. To regard all criticism of Israel as antisemitism is simply wrong. It depends on the criticism.

Criticism of Israel is of five kinds. First there is the criticism every nation receives because none is perfect. Living with such criticism is part of democratic freedom, and Israel is a democracy.

Second is the criticism that comes from siding with the underdog, with David against Goliath. Once Israel was seen as the David, the small nation surrounded by large enemies. After its victory in the Six Day War, that tide slowly changed. Today Israel is seen as the Goliath, the Palestinians as David. We have to live with that. Better an Israel that is strong, safe and criticised than one that is weak, vulnerable and elicits people's sympathy.

Third there is criticism that is simply ignorant of the facts, the most significant being the claim that Israel is an obstacle to peace. In fact, in the 1920s and 1930s there were various plans

for the partition of the land into two states, one Jewish, one Arab. Jews accepted them; the Arabs rejected them. In 1947, the United Nations voted for partition. Again, Jews accepted, the Arabs refused. David Ben Gurion reiterated the call for peace as a central part of Israel's Declaration of Independence in May 1948. Israel's neighbours – Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq – responded by attacking it on all fronts.

The offer was renewed in 1967 after the Six Day War. The response of the Arab League, meeting in Khartoum in September 1967, was the famous 'Three Nos': no to peace, no to negotiations, no to the recognition of the State of Israel. The call was repeated many times by Golda Meir, and always decisively rejected.

The boldest offer was made by Ehud Barak at Taba, 2001. It offered the Palestinians a state in the whole of Gaza and 97 per cent of the West Bank, with border compensations for the other 3 per cent, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Many members of the Palestinian team wanted to accept. Yasser Arafat refused.

The obstacle to peace from the 1920s to today has been the refusal of the Palestinians and their supporters to grant Israel legitimacy, the right to exist. You cannot – logically cannot – make peace with one who denies your right to exist. Peace is more than a resting-place on the road to war.

Fourth there is criticism that is not simply ignorant but wilfully ignorant, deliberately misleading. One such is the claim that Israel is racist, an apartheid state. In fact in Israeli hospitals people of all faiths and ethnicities are treated alike. All have the vote. All can attend Israeli universities. All can be elected to and take their place in Knesset.

A Druze Arab, Majalli Wahabi, briefly served as President of Israel after Moshe Katsav's resignation while acting head of state Dalia Itzik was out of the country. A Christian Arab, George Karra, headed the panel of judges that tried and found guilty Israel's President Katsav. None of these is conceivable in an apartheid state.

Meanwhile in December 2010 Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declared: "We have frankly said, and always will say: If there is an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, we won't agree to the presence of one Israeli in it." This vision of a *Judenrein* Palestine really is racist.

Fifth is principled anti-Zionism of the kind embraced by Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran which sees the destruction of Israel as a matter of non-negotiable religious principle. This is pure supersessionist theology of the kind practised by the Church for many centuries, and is classic anti-Judaism. In a world in which there are 82 Christian states and 56 Islamic ones, it says that Jews alone are not entitled to a home of their own.

Interwoven with the fourth and fifth types of criticism are all the classic antisemitic myths, from the Blood Libel to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

All this should concern us for many reasons. First, some of it is antisemitic, increasingly so. Second, hate-filled rhetoric is being allowed on British and American campuses in the name of academic freedom. This is not academic freedom, which means the freedom to hold and express your views without fear, even when they run against the consensus. This freedom from intimidation is being denied to defenders of Israel today.

Academic freedom means the willingness to let all sides of the argument be respectfully heard. Manifestly this is not happening. What is happening was best described by Julian Benda in his famous book *Le Trahison des Clercs*, “The Treason of the Intellectuals.” In it he said that the academy had ceased to be a place for the pursuit of truth and had become an arena for “the intellectual organisation of political hatreds.” He wrote those words in 1927. Reflect on what happened a few years later.

Refusal to give Israel a fair hearing will not bring peace, will not help the Palestinians, and will do great damage to the cause of freedom in the Middle East. The Arab Spring of 2011 showed how dictatorial are the regimes of the countries that have been in the forefront of hostility to Israel. That is because historically antisemitism, and now anti-Zionism, have been the weapons of choice of dictators seeking to deflect criticism of their own rule.

We can state the consequence in a simple sentence: *Those who deny Israel's freedom will never achieve their own.*

None of this should stop us supporting all initiatives for peace and working for a Middle East in which all people, of every ethnicity and faith, have freedom, dignity and security.

## *Letter 18: God of life, Book of Life*

Rabbi, we have more questions but we've decided to save them for now and simply ask you, **What is your message to us in the year to come? Ruth and Michael.**

**R**UTH, 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.

As I write these words, Ruth and Michael, I celebrate twenty years as Chief Rabbi. It's strange to think that I began this task around the time you were born. In those years 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 he remains 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.

## CHIEF RABBI ONLINE

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The front cover illustration is "Archives – VI of S.O.M. Suite"  
by Shraga Weil.

Weil was born in Nitra, Czechoslovakia in 1918, and studied at the Academy of Art in Prague. He produced his first graphic works during World War II, which he spent as a prisoner. After the war, he sailed for Israel on an illegal immigrant ship. He arrived in Israel in 1947 and became a member of Kibbutz Ha'ogen, where he lived and worked until his death on 20 February 2009.

His works include the doors of the main entrance to the Knesset and the President's residence in Jerusalem, the ceramic walls of the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv and the wooden panels in the Israel hall at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. His work blends modernism and tradition, and is marked by his vivid use of biblical and rabbinic motifs. In 1959 he was awarded the Dizengoff Prize.

In this serigraph entitled "Archives", Weil depicts an individual at the stage of searching for the answer to life. Going back and through all the books he has read, he is sitting in his archives, trying to find the answers to his questions. It beautifully depicts the connection, in Judaism, between "book" and "life". Throughout the year we try to ensure that our life is aligned with God's book, and on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days between, we pray to be written in God's Book of Life.

It is reproduced courtesy of the Safrai Gallery in Jerusalem, [www.safrai.com](http://www.safrai.com), where many of his serigraphs and posters can be purchased.

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