

Why Am I a Jew?

I am a Jew because, being a child of my people, I have heard the call to add my chapter to its unfinished story. I am a stage on its journey, a connecting link between the generations. The dreams and hopes of my ancestors live on in me, and I am the guardian of their trust, now and for the future.

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

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

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

I am a Jew because our nation, though at times it suffered the deepest poverty, never gave up on its commitment to helping the poor, or rescuing Jews from other lands, or fighting for justice for the

oppressed, and did so without self-congratulation, because it was a mitzvah, because a Jew could do no less.

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

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

I am, simply, proud to be a Jew.

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

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

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

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

And though I admire other civilizations and faiths, and believe each has brought something special into the world, this is still my people, my heritage, my God. In our uniqueness lies our universality. Through being what we alone are, we give to humanity what only we can give.

This, then, is our story, our gift to the next generation. I received it from my parents and they from theirs across great expanses of space and time. There is nothing quite like it. It changed and today it still challenges the moral imagination of mankind. I want to say to my children: Take it, cherish it, learn to understand and to love it. Carry it, and it will carry you. And may you in turn pass it on to your children. For you are a member of an eternal people, a letter in their scroll. Let their eternity live on in you.

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