



# WHY BE JEWISH?

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY "I AM JEWISH?"

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In 2004, a book was written with over one hundred responses from politicians, entrepreneurs, rabbis, actors, and entertainers to the simple question:

### **What do you mean when you say, "I am Jewish?"**

Here are some of their responses:

**"Judaism to me is the name of the telephone in my heart that allows me to speak to God."**

-Shia LaBeouf, Actor

**"Living as a Jew - in the United States, Israel, or anywhere else - requires an act of will, a course of conscious decision. As frequently described, we remain a choosing people, more than a chosen people"**

-Michael Medved, author & radio talk-show host

**"But if I were asked for a definition of Jewishness, I would say it relies upon, indeed thrives upon, the dialectic of universalism and tribalism, the self-correcting tension between seeming opposites, Each hemisphere of our soul keeps the other honest."**

-Samuel G. Freedman, journalist for New York Times and professor of Journalism at Columbia University

**"Remember the guy who smashed all the idols in the idol store? His mother had a heart attack when she saw the mess, but I'm sure she bragged about it later. That's us. That's me. I'm Jewish."**

-Sarah Silverman, Comic

**"My Jewish origin has always been a source of pride. I share in and benefit from a deep and brilliant stream of culture and intellectual activity that has flowed for thousands of years and is flowing strongly still."**

-Milton Friedman, Nobel Prize recipient for Economic Sciences

**"To be a Jew is to watch with good humor how this planet has treated its Jews, and to remain humorous....Everyone knows by now that no one can kill our spirit."**

-Jackie Mason, Comic

**THE FIRST JEWISH IDEA:  
WHAT WORDS OF TORAH WOULD YOU FIRST TEACH A CHILD?**

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**TALMUD, SUCCAH, 42A**

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When a child learns how to speak, the father should begin teaching him Torah.	יודע לדבר אביו לומדו תורה...
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**What words of Torah would you begin with?**

**SHEMOS CHAPTER 20**

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**ב** אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים: לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, עַל-פָּנָי.

2 I am the LORD thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.

**VAYIKRA CHAPTER 19**

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**יח** לֹא-תִקֹּם וְלֹא-תִטּוֹר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ, וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹתְךָ: אֲנִי, יְהוָה.

18 Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

**DEVARIM CHAPTER 6**

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**ד** שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד.

4 Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

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## TALMUD, SUCCAH, CONT.

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Which verse of Torah should you begin teaching?	תורה מאי היא?
“The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the Morasha of the Congregation of Yaakov.” (Devarim 33:4)	תורה צוה לנו מורשה קהלת יעקב

### What is a Morasha?

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## TALMUD, SANHEDRIN, 59A

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*The Talmud is discussing why the Torah is unique to the Jewish people...*

“The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the Morasha of the Congregation of Yaakov	תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה
The Torah is uniquely connected to the Jewish people and not to any other nation	לנו מורשה ולא להם
According to one opinion, Morasha is understood to mean “Inheritance,” so if another nation claims such a connection to Torah it is like theft.	מאן דאמר מורשה מיגזל קא גזיל
According to another opinion Morasha means “Engaged Bride,” someone who neglects the relationship with Torah is like someone who violated the relationship of a betrothed couple.	מאן דאמר מאורסה דינו כנערה המאורסה

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## QUESTIONS LEFT TO CONSIDER

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- Why does the Talmud recommend we start teaching torah with this verse? What idea is it hoping we convey to our children?
- What are the 2 opinions as to the definition of “Morasha” disagreeing about?
- What the difference between comparing the Torah to an inheritance versus a bride who is engaged?
- According to the second opinion, why is Torah specifically compared to a betrothed couple? Why not a couple married for many years?
- How do the different understandings of “Morasha” parallel the different ways in which a person might approach their relationship with Torah and Judaism?



## CHIEF RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS A LETTER IN THE SCROLL

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The Baal Shem Tov--founder of the Hassidic movement in the eighteenth century--said that the Jewish people is a living Sefer Torah, and every Jew is one of its letters. I am moved by that image, and it invites a question--*the* question: Will we, in our lifetime, be letters in the scroll of the Jewish people?

At some stage, each of us must decide how to live our lives. We have many options, and no generation in history has had a wider choice. We can live for work or success or fame or power. We can have a whole series of lifestyles and relationships. We can explore any of a myriad of faiths, mysticisms, or therapies. There is only one constraint--namely, that however much of anything else we have, we have only one life, and it is short. How we live and what we live for are the most fateful decisions we ever make.

Will we, in our lifetime, be  
letter in the scroll of the  
Jewish people?

I am a Jew because, knowing  
the story of my people, I  
hear their call to write the  
next chapter.

We can see life as a succession of moments spent, like coins, in return for pleasures of various kinds. Or we can see our life as though it were a letter of the alphabet. A letter on its own has no meaning, yet when letters are joined to others they make a word, words combine with others to make a sentence, sentences connect to make a paragraph, and

paragraphs join to make a story. That is how the Baal Shem Tov understood life. Every Jew is a letter. Each Jewish family is a word, every community a sentence and the Jewish people through time constitutes a story, the strangest and most moving story in the annals of mankind.

That metaphor is for me the key to understanding our ancestors' decision to remain Jewish even in times of great trial and tribulation. I suspect they knew that they were letters in this story, a story of great risk and courage. Their ancestors had taken the risk of pledging themselves to a covenant with God and thus undertaking a very special role in history. They had undertaken a journey, begun in the distant past and continued by every successive generation. At the heart of the covenant is the idea of *emunah*, which means faithfulness or loyalty. And Jews felt a loyalty to generations past and generations yet unborn to continue the narrative. A Torah scroll that has a missing letter is rendered invalid, defective. I think that most Jews did not want theirs to be that missing letter...

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come this far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one.