

Rabbi Mark Wildes

THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE

DISCOVERING THE SOUL
OF JEWISH THOUGHT
AND PRACTICE

THE DAHAN FAMILY EDITION

MJE
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The Jewish Experience
Discovering the Soul of Jewish Thought and Practice

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Dedicated by Jackie and Omri Dahan

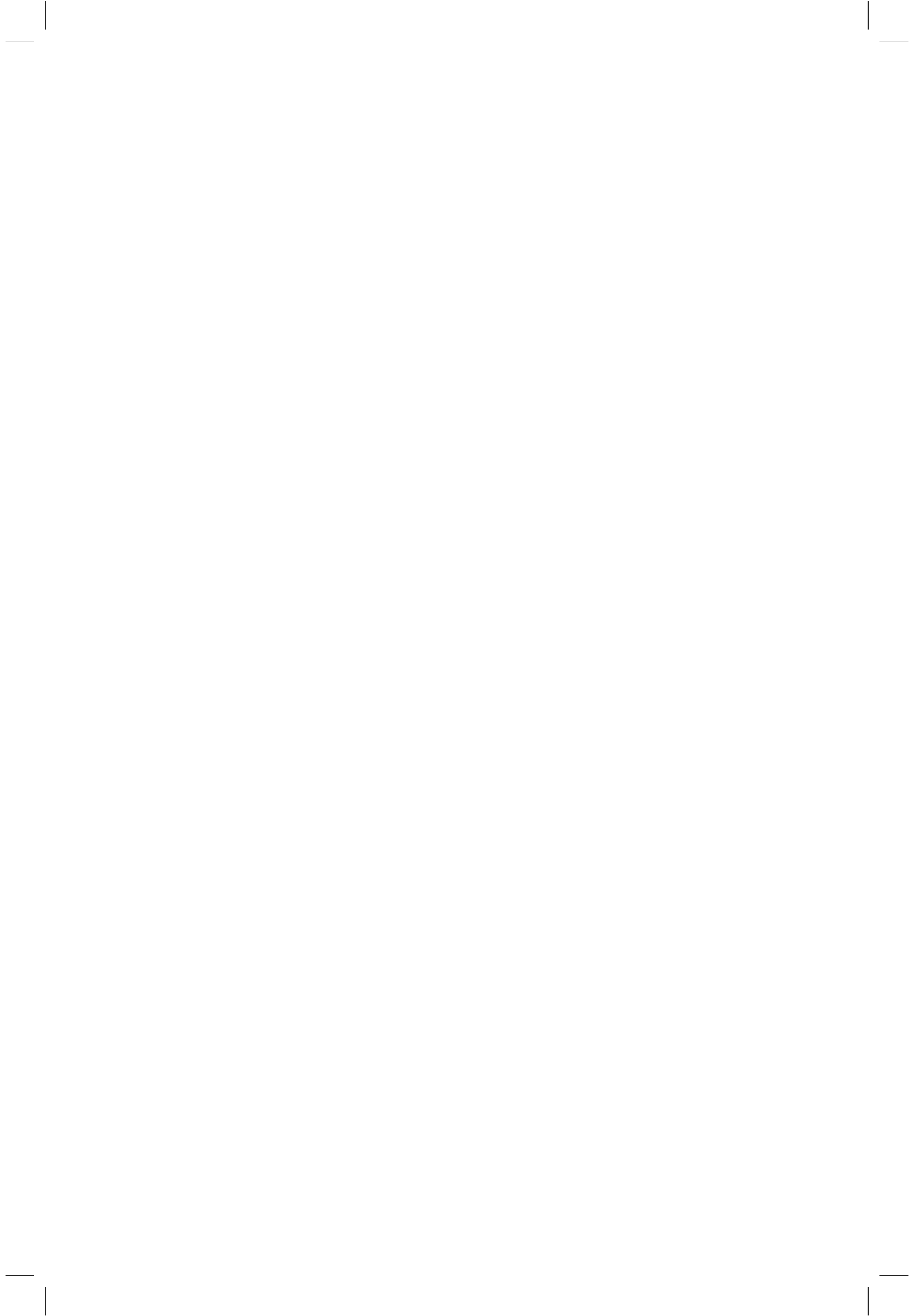
*To our grandparents and parents, who bestowed upon us
an unbroken chain of proud Jewish life...
and to our children, Maya, Ezra, and Jonah
the future links in the chain.*

*To our beloved friends,
Rabbi Mark and Jill Wildes
for seeing and igniting the spark in all of us.*

זֶה דּוֹר דּוֹרָשׁוּ מִבְּקֵשֵׁי פָנֶיךָ...

*This is the generation of those who seek Him,
those who strive for your Presence...*

(Psalms 24:6)



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Introduction

Year after year, Apple achieves so many more technological breakthroughs than their competition. Apple has access to the same talent pool as all the other technology companies, yet they consistently innovate and outsell all the others. What is their secret?

In a popular TED Talk with over 64 million views, Simon Sinek explains that the most successful organizations, companies, and leaders communicate not only *what* they do or *how* they do it, but also *why* they exist. What is the company or leader's purpose? Why should anyone care about their company or product? If all Apple communicated was that they make beautifully designed computers, they wouldn't outsell their competitors, because telling others *what* you do is simply not inspiring. To motivate others to act, people need to know the *why*. This is the reason Apple's marketing communicates *why* they exist. As Sinek puts it: "People don't buy *what* you do but *why* you do it."

How many of us know the *whys* behind Judaism? How educated are we as to why Judaism exists in the first place – what it is trying to accomplish for our lives and for the world at large? Most of us know Judaism has a lot of *whats*. It purports a belief in God, has a day of rest called the Sabbath, and mandates certain dietary restrictions. But *why*? Why do these and the many other Jewish traditions matter? Why choose Judaism over the countless other religions in the first place? Why choose religion at all? The reality is that most of us were never told the *whys* behind the many *whats* of Judaism, leaving us unmoved and unmotivated.

As the great Jewish thinker Maimonides wrote: "You can only love God according to the knowledge you have of Him. The amount of

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love depends on the amount of knowledge. A small amount of knowledge arouses a lesser love, and a greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love” (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:6). This quote captures the intimate relationship between what we know intellectually and what we feel emotionally, between our knowledge of Judaism and the feelings we have for being Jewish.

It’s no wonder that so few Jews possess a deep appreciation for their Jewish heritage when they never had the chance to learn the whys behind Judaism’s beliefs and practices. Although Jewish people rank high in secular education, most of us finish our Jewish education by the time we turn twelve or thirteen. Bar and bat mitzvahs effectively serve as graduation ceremonies from Jewish learning. So as we enter adolescence and the college years and start asking the big questions about life, Judaism has already become a distant memory relegated to the past. For lots of people, Judaism isn’t in the mix of ideas to help us address the hard problems of life. Instead, many turn to other spiritual traditions. Buddhism, yoga, and mindfulness have become alternative religions, but Torah is no longer a source of wisdom to consult. Because we only learned about Judaism when we were children, it doesn’t feel sophisticated enough to speak to our complex adult lives. As a result, we remain unaware of the depth of our Jewish heritage and its relevance in the modern world.

That’s why I wrote this book. I have spent the last thirty years teaching the fundamentals of Jewish thought and practice, demonstrating their relevance to our lives today. My beloved students come from all backgrounds, primarily men and women with no formal Jewish education but who are smart, well educated, curious, and motivated to learn. The encounter with my students each week has forced me to clarify complicated ideas and articulate *why* the age-old concepts and practices of Judaism are more essential for our lives today than ever before. This book is for bright and inquisitive but Jewishly uneducated people like my students who are seeking more depth in their lives.

But this book is not only for Jews or non-Jews with little or no background in Judaism. It is also for students who went to Jewish schools. It is possible to attend Jewish day school for twelve years, study Torah for a year or two in Israel, and even complete rabbinical school, like I did, and still not learn the reasons behind the mitzvot and the fundamental ideas of

Introduction

Judaism. Similarly, many of my students have some Jewish education but still feel that they don't know the basics of Judaism. This book is for them too.

It is also for Jewish educators. I get calls and texts all the time from rabbinic colleagues and educators asking me how I teach about belief in God, how we know the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, why God needs our prayers, or the meaning of Shabbat. This book is therefore also for the thousands of rabbis and teachers in the United States and throughout the world who are looking for a ready-made guide to help them present basic topics of Judaism.

In reworking my classes for this book, I made sure to incorporate my students' questions and comments, since my goal is not only to present Judaism's core teachings and the whats of Jewish observance, but also why these ideas and observances are compelling for us today. Besides explaining what classical Judaism has to say about God and Revelation, I will therefore also discuss why these areas of Jewish tradition still matter today.

This includes many deep and fundamental questions: Why does believing in God or in a divinely inspired Torah impact our lives? How should the biblical text be read in modern times: literally or metaphorically? In what way are practices of observant Jews derived from the Torah? How are Shabbat, *kashrut*, and other parts of Jewish tradition meant to transform us as individuals and as a community?

I will also try to answer questions like: Does God really care if we drive a car on Shabbat? What does it matter what I eat? Or my favorite question about prayer: If God already knows what we want, what is the point of praying, and how is it designed to bring about the kind of mindfulness our generation seeks today? We all know that giving to others in need is a good thing, but how does performing acts of kindness or giving charity also bind us to God? Is there a specific *Jewish* responsibility to fix the world's problems and bring about positive change for society at large? What happens after we die? Is there really a Messiah, or was that just a made-up idea to keep oppressed Jews from losing hope? What is the Jewish attitude to sex? Is there religious significance to the modern State of Israel – especially in the wake of October 7, the worst single attack on the Jewish people since the Holocaust? Finally, what is the point of all the Jewish holidays? Why is Yom Kippur, a twenty-four-hour day when we deprive ourselves of food and drink, considered the happiest day of the year? Why

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is the Jewish New Year so solemn – and does Judaism have an equivalent of New Year’s resolutions? In general, what is each holiday all about and, more importantly, what spiritual impact is each one meant to have on us?

Some chapters in this volume lend themselves more to ideas (the whys), such as the chapters on God and Torah, and others to hands-on “how-tos” (the whats), such as those on Shabbat, prayer, and kindness. In addressing the whys, I offer many of the rational explanations offered by the Sages for the mitzvot, as well as deep ideas from the Kabbalah, age-old mystical wisdom that so many people are finding relevant today. In this way, this book serves as both an introduction to Judaism and a hands-on guidebook to Jewish practice.

In writing this book, I struggled between referring to Jews as “they,” in the third person, and “we,” in the first person. On one hand, this book is for anyone interested in Judaism, Jew and non-Jew alike, and so “they” reflects the inclusive spirit I strived for. At the same time, “we” feels warmer and more personable, a tone I try to achieve in my classes and writing as well. To try to strike a balance, I ultimately decided to alternate between first and third person throughout the book. If you’re a non-Jewish reader, please don’t be put off – this book is for everyone!

Throughout the book, in addition to the main text, you will see the following additional features:

- **Kabbalah Corner** – Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, explores the Torah’s deeper spiritual dimension. In each chapter, you’ll find “Kabbalah Corner” boxes offering inspirational, eye-opening insights from Jewish mysticism that relate to the subject matter. You’ll recognize these by the (סס) icon. In Kabbala, a letter on fire symbolizes the fusion of divine energy (*ohr*) with form (*tzurah*), expressing how the infinite light of God is channeled through the finite vessels of Hebrew letters. This imagery reflects the dynamic, living nature of Torah, where each letter burns with spiritual vitality and creative power.
- **Quotes** – Classical Jewish works have a remarkable ability to distill Jewish wisdom into pithy, profound teachings. Throughout the book, you’ll find “Quotes” boxes featuring direct quotations from essential sources from the Bible and Talmud down to modern texts. You’ll recognize these by the shaded background ().

- **Stop and Reflect** – Judaism is about more than laws and ideas; it's a path to personal growth and a deeper connection with God and with yourself. In each chapter, you'll find "Stop and Reflect" boxes encouraging you to pause, reflect, and jot down your thoughts. You'll recognize these by the (🛑) icon.
- **Takeaways** – Each chapter in this book is chock-full of information. To make sure the forest doesn't get lost for the trees, at the end of each chapter you'll find a set of short, bullet-point "Takeaways" that sum up the chapter's essential points.

Finally, while the book expresses my own take on the different areas of Jewish tradition, I also rely on the profound ideas of my mentors and teachers from whom I have been privileged to learn. In particular, I often cite the teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), a brilliant talmudic scholar and philosopher whose teachings have had a profound impact on me. While I never merited to study under this great rabbi directly, most of my teachers were his students. I also went to great lengths to incorporate the teachings of many other rabbinic, contemporary, and classic thinkers, while offering both rational and mystical explanations to ensure this work can be appreciated by as wide an audience as possible. Reading this book is therefore like reading twenty books in one since it incorporates the insights of many different scholars – ideas which not only speak to me, but also have resonated with my many students for the last three decades.

This book offers a reboot for your Judaism. It would be nice to begin with a clean slate, to start without any preconceived assumptions we have about Judaism. But even if you do not approach this book with a clean slate, your starting point is the part of you that seeks answers, that craves purpose and meaning, and feels some connection, however distant, to the Divine. That too is a good place from which to restart your Judaism: from the spark of your Jewish soul.

I write this introduction sitting at the Western Wall in Jerusalem with the hope that the holiness of this place somehow finds its way into this book. My sincere wish is that you find my thoughts and ideas compelling and inspiring. I pray my words arouse a renewed interest in your Jewish heritage and kindle a greater love for Torah, your soul, and their divine source.



Acknowledgments

From a young age I was blessed with extraordinary parents, mentors, colleagues, and friends, who have shaped my life and guided my work. Without them, this work would never have come to be.

First, to my dear friends Jackie and Omri Dahan, who generously sponsored *The Jewish Experience*. The talmudic sage Rabbi Chanina once said: *I have learned much from my teachers and even more of from my friends, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them.* (Talmud Ta'anit 7a). My relationship with Jackie and Omri began as teacher and students at the Manhattan Jewish Experience (MJE is the outreach and educational program I established in 1998 which engages less-affiliated Jewish twenty- and thirty-year-olds in Jewish life), but over time our bond developed into a friendship from which my wife and I have gained immensely. As much as I remain their teacher and mentor, they have become mine, guiding me in my outreach and educational work. I am indebted to them for encouraging me to write this book while providing the means to make it possible. In doing so, Jackie and Omri have ensured that the same wisdom that inspired their own journey is now available to illuminate the paths for others.

To my beloved parents Ruth and Leon Wildes, of blessed memory, who modeled a Judaism I have transmitted to my own children and students. My mother, a woman of deep faith and warmth, was my first genuine source of spiritual inspiration. Her love for Shabbat and the graciousness with which she received guests at her expanding Shabbat

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table inspired me to establish MJE. This book is a testament to the love she gave me and the model of Judaism she created in our home.

My father was my greatest mentor. From the time I was in elementary school through graduate school, my father would correct all my papers with his notorious red pen. It was sometimes a brutal experience, but he taught me how to write and speak, reviewing my weekly Shabbat sermons for close to three decades. My law school professor and Torah study partner, my father stood behind my every endeavor. When he saw my passion was Jewish outreach and education, he supported my decision to establish MJE and not follow him into the legal field, even after putting me through law school and graduate school. This book stands as a tribute to his unwavering guidance and love.

My wife Jill – my partner for the last twenty-nine years – is my greatest inspiration. Her passion for Jewish life has motivated thousands of others to explore their own spiritual heritage. Jill devotes herself to the myriads of young people in the MJE community, hosting twenty students at our Shabbat table each week and modeling a Judaism which is both open and vibrant. She is the love of my life and my constant source of support, without whom neither MJE nor this book would ever have been possible.

My children, Yosef, Ezra, Yehuda, and Avigayil, are my deepest sources of pride. I am grateful to each of them for their contributions to this book: Yosef and Yehuda for helping me clarify and formulate some of the kabbalistic ideas, Ezra for his help with the teleological argument and the relationship between God and morality, and Avigayil for working with me on the quotes found throughout the work. One of my greatest joys is studying Torah with my children, and so weaving their insights into this work was especially meaningful.

To my brother Michael and sister-in-law Amy, for all their love and support. Amy originated the name “Manhattan Jewish Experience” (MJE), which in turn inspired the title of this book, “The Jewish Experience.” Judaism was never meant to be something we just study, but rather an *experience* that is lived and celebrated. That is what we have shared with the participants of MJE these last twenty-six years – a Jewish experience – and it is my sincere hope this book offers the same opportunity.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my beloved teacher and mentor Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter for encouraging me to write this book. For over twenty years I've sat at the feet of this brilliant scholar, absorbing his wisdom and being the beneficiary of his loving guidance. It was Rabbi Schacter who first invited me to teach a Basic Judaism course at his then-synagogue The Jewish Center in New York City. That class, which developed over the next three decades, is the subject matter for this book.

To Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt, of blessed memory, my childhood rabbi who guided me in my first outreach endeavor at the Queens Jewish Center, and Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, of blessed memory – noted scholar and past president of Yeshiva University where my father, myself, and all my children studied. To my rabbinic mentors Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, Rabbi Johnny Krug, and Rabbi Aaron Bina – your impact is woven into this book and all my work. To my MJE colleagues Rabbi Pinny Rosenthal, Rabbi Ezra Cohen, Rabbi Avi Heller, and the entire MJE team – you make our mission to educate and inspire possible.

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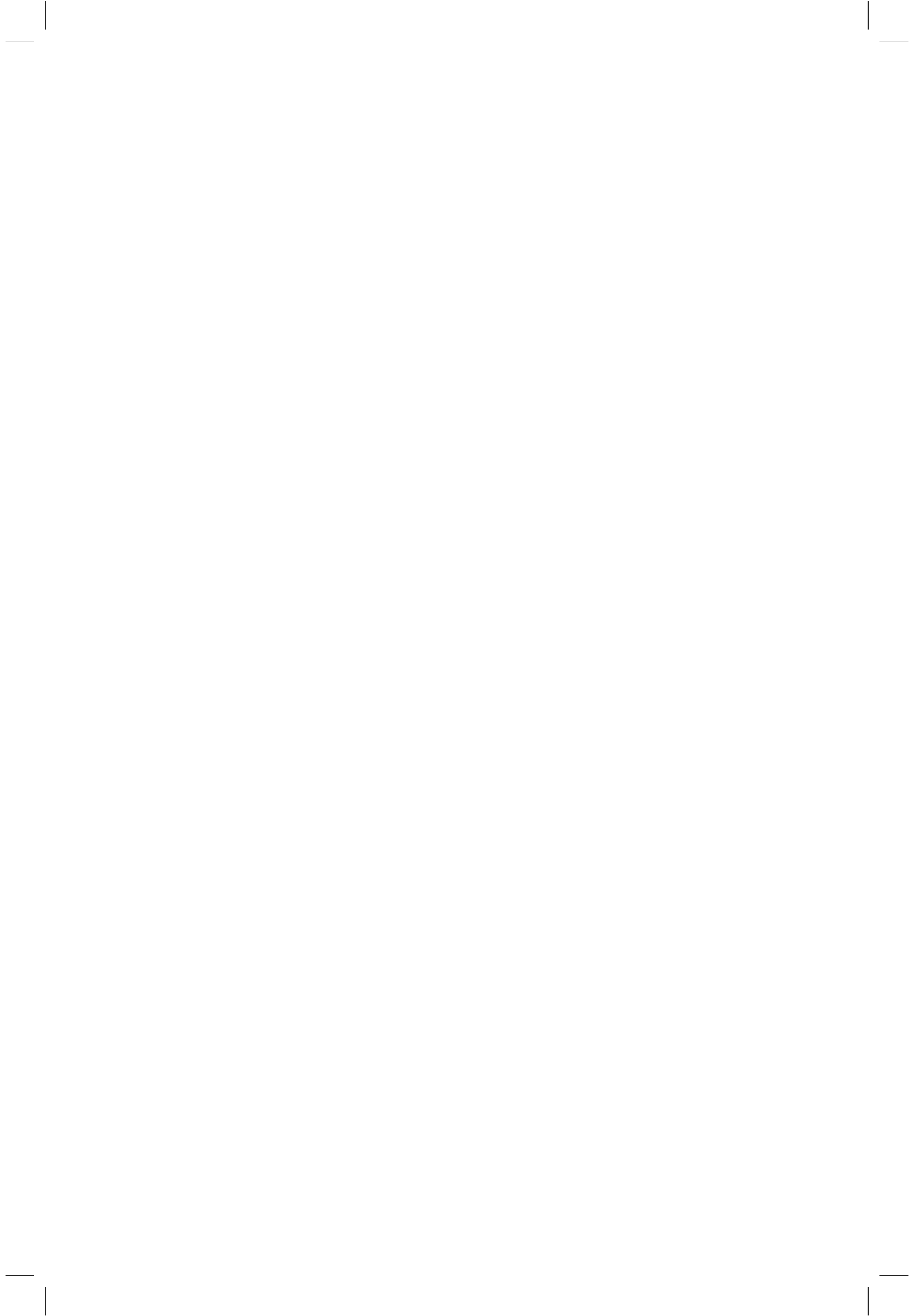
And finally, to God for granting me life, sustaining me, and enabling me to write this book. I am humbled by the experience of sharing even just a measure of the Torah's timeless wisdom. May these words bring more of His light into the world, enabling others to draw closer to His presence.





CHAPTER 1

Finding God



FINDING GOD

*A Journey Through History,
Science, and the Soul*

CHAPTER

1

I have always considered myself a rationally oriented individual. I was attracted to Judaism's intellectual approach already in my teens and loved to debate my more skeptical friends using the logic and reason I would find in the Talmud. I was drawn to more rational rabbinic figures like Maimonides, and I loved that Judaism did not require me to simply "believe" but instead encouraged logical and reasoned analysis. As I have gotten older, though, I have come to realize the limited ability of logic and reason to answer all of life's questions – including the belief in God. I have found great wisdom and inspiration in Judaism's mystical teachings, and I feel strongly that they also must be studied if one is to gain a true appreciation for the depth of Jewish thought, especially when it comes to God. In the next few sections, I will therefore present both the rational and mystical basis for the Jewish belief in a supernatural God. Perhaps one approach will speak to you more than the other, but both perspectives are necessary to give us a window into arguably the most important contribution Judaism has made to the world: the belief in one God.

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I like to call these *finding God from without* and *finding God from within*. Finding God from without involves looking at external and more objective factors – history and science – which strongly suggest the existence of a supernatural creator. Finding God from within signifies a more mystical approach, tapping into a spiritual reality the Jewish Sages believe exists within each of us. According to Judaism, we can use both avenues to develop a belief in, and more importantly, an attachment to God.

We will start with the more rational methodology of *finding God from without* in part 1 and proceed to the more mystical approach of *finding God from within* in part 2. We will then discuss the relationship between God, morality, and kindness in part 3.

PART 1: FINDING GOD FROM WITHOUT

Close your eyes, turn off your brain, and just *believe* away. This is how many people think of faith. While this may be true of other religions, it is generally not true of Judaism.¹ Judaism largely rejects blind faith. Indeed, the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides formulates the biblical command to believe in God as “to know” that there is a God.² Judaism demands that we have *knowledge*, an intellectual basis for our belief. But how is that possible? The God of Judaism cannot be seen or experienced by any of the five senses. So how can God’s existence be rationally demonstrated?

To answer this question, it is important to recognize that absolute proof, even in the realm of science, simply does not exist. A theory is accepted not because it has been 100 percent proven, but because it *best* explains the cumulative data or phenomena. As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman is often quoted: “It is scientific only to say what is more likely and less likely.”

Therefore, our goal is not to demonstrate proof but probability – what makes the most sense. That is also how we make

Chapter 1: Finding God

our most important life decisions – not based on complete certainty, but on what is most reasonable.

One of my mentors shared that right before he was about to get married, the officiating rabbi – the great twentieth-century thinker Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik – turned to him and, somewhat in jest, asked: “So, are you sure she is the right one?” My friend, the groom, was stunned by the question and said nothing in response. The rabbi continued: “Good, only a fool could be sure.” Rabbi Soloveitchik was trying to assure my friend that there is no such thing as perfect certainty, especially when it comes to matters of the heart, such as the person we marry. On the other hand, that does not mean the groom was being foolish or acting irrationally by getting married. Most brides and grooms believe they are making the right choice. But it is impossible to be 100 percent certain of anything – not in the realm of human relationships and not about the existence of God. My goal in this section is therefore not to establish a definitive proof for God’s existence but to articulate a reasonable basis for belief, one that best explains our reality.

There are several external factors which serve as a rational basis for the belief in God, giving us what contemporary author Lawrence Kelemen calls “permission to believe.” The two I have found most compelling are the “Argument from Jewish History” and the “Argument from Intelligent Design.” Neither proves God’s existence, but both make a powerful argument for the existence of a supernatural creator.

THE ARGUMENT FROM JEWISH HISTORY

The story is told of King Louis XIV asking the philosopher Pascal for some proof of a supernatural force in the world. Pascal answered, “The Jews, your majesty. The Jews.”

Pascal was far from alone. To me and so many others, the survival of the Jewish people – against all odds – serves as evidence, or at least a reasonable basis, for the belief in a supernatural force responsible for Jewish survival throughout the ages.

The Jewish Experience

“The Jewish people are eternal. Nothing can destroy the Jew; only his body, never his soul.” (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

Allow me to explain as we take a brief stroll through Jewish history.³ The Jewish people began as slaves. But unlike other groups who served the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, the Jews managed to escape into the Sinai Desert in around the year 1300 BCE. Attacked by warring tribes, the Jews wandered in the wilderness but eventually arrived at their promised land. After fighting more battles, the Jews settled peacefully in ancient Israel, building a Temple in Jerusalem under the wise King Solomon. The Temple stood for more than four centuries until 586 BCE, when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, having first defeated the Assyrian and Egyptian armies, swept into Israel, plundered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and exiled the survivors to Babylon.

BABYLONIA AND PERSIA

For all intents and purposes, Jewish history should have ended at this point, with the remaining Jewish minority assimilating into Babylonian culture. But the Persians toppled the Babylonians, and the Persian King Ahasuerus installed an antisemitic leader named Haman, who attempted to annihilate the entire Diaspora Jewish community. Haman's genocidal attempt was not only foiled, but it reignited a Jewish renaissance, celebrated each year on the Jewish holiday of Purim. Meanwhile, the Persian leader, Cyrus the Great, had allowed the Jews to return to Israel and rebuild their Temple. A small but committed group of Jews did so, becoming the first people ever to regain a land they had lost more than a half a century before.

GREECE AND ROME

Under Alexander the Great, the Greeks defeated the Persians and eventually ruled the Jews of ancient Judea. Following a

Chapter 1: Finding God

period of much infighting between Jewish Hellenists and traditionalists, the Greek Seleucids outlawed the practice of Judaism and converted the Jewish Temple into a place of idol worship and paganism. The Jews went underground. Utilizing guerrilla tactics, they revolted against the Greeks, repelling their far superior forces, and ultimately expelled the Greeks – the mightiest military force on the planet – from Jerusalem. The success of the Jewish rebellion and reinstatement of Jewish independence in ancient Israel is celebrated every year on the holiday of Hanukkah.

Meanwhile, Rome expanded its empire and, in 40 BCE, having succeeded Greece as the world power, dispatched tens of thousands of infantry and cavalry to conquer Jerusalem from the Jews. There were several Jewish rebellions against the Romans, but all were suppressed. Thousands of Jews were killed, the Jewish Temple was razed to the ground, and, once again, the Jewish survivors fled into the Diaspora.

TWO THOUSAND LONG YEARS

In the Diaspora, the Jews, no longer in their land and without a Temple, were more vulnerable than ever. What followed for the next two thousand years were centuries of persecution – crusades, expulsions, inquisitions, pogroms – more and more antisemitism, culminating in the Holocaust. Once again, that should have been the last chapter in the history of the Jews.

But it wasn't. Quite the opposite.

“Israel is like a lamb surrounded by seventy wolves: It survives only thanks to the protection of the shepherd.”
(*Midrash Tanchuma*)

COMING HOME

Instead, for the first time in history, a people twice exiled from its land returned to establish an independent state. On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was created.

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The next day, fewer than 45,000 Jews, many of them Holocaust survivors, faced the combined military forces of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Transjordan. The secretary-general of the Arab League proclaimed over the airwaves: “This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre.”⁴ Somehow the Jews held out. A month after the war broke out, the United Nations declared a ceasefire, and for the first time in two thousand years the Jews had a state of their own.

IN JUST SIX DAYS

In 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and other Arab groups opposed to Israel’s existence were created to terrorize the Jewish community from within. The Jews held out until May 1967, when massive numbers of troops began mobilizing along Israel’s southern border with Egypt and its northern border with Syria, the Golan Heights. Egypt’s President Abdul Nasser ordered the United Nations Emergency Force to withdraw, and on May 18, 1967, the Voice of the Arabs radio station proclaimed: “The sole method we shall apply against Israel is total war, which will result in the extermination of Zionist existence.”⁵ The Syrian defense minister, Hafez Assad, announced that “the time has come to enter into a battle of annihilation.”⁶ On

KABBALAH CORNER:

The year 1948 corresponds to 5708 in the Jewish calendar. Astonishingly, the 5,708th verse of the Torah, Deuteronomy 30:3, states: “The Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you: He will return to collect you from all the peoples to which the Lord your God has scattered you.” A kabbalist in the holy city of Tzefat pointed out this connection to my teacher Rabbi Benjamin Blech, noting that this verse is a clear allusion to the ingathering of the exiles, which took place in that very year, marking the establishment of the State of Israel.



STOP AND REFLECT:

If you had to rate the depth of your connection to Israel on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the weakest connection and 10 being the strongest, what number would you choose and why?



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IDF soldiers at the Western Wall, June 7, 1967

May 30, King Hussein of Jordan entered into a defense pact with Egypt, whereupon Nasser announced: “The armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon are poised on the border of Israel... while standing behind us are the armies of Iraq, Algeria, Kuwait, Sudan, and the whole Arab nation.”⁷ On June 4, Iraq joined the military alliance with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The president of Iraq declared: “Our goal is clear: to wipe Israel off the map.”⁸

A total of 465,000 troops, 2,800 tanks, and 800 aircraft encircled the tiny infant State of Israel.⁹ As Middle East policy analyst Mitchell Bard described, “Approximately 180 Israeli tanks faced 1,400 Syrian tanks on the Golan Heights, while fewer than 500 defenders with only three tanks were attacked by 600,000 Egyptian soldiers backed by 2,000 tanks and 550 aircraft along the Suez Canal.”¹⁰

Rather than wait to be attacked, Israel struck preemptively. On June 5, 1967, virtually the entire Israeli air force took off at 7:14 a.m. In less than two hours, three hundred Egyptian aircraft were destroyed. Israeli fighters attacked Jordanian and Syrian planes and an airfield in Iraq. By the end of the first day, almost the entire Egyptian and Jordanian air force – and half of the Syrian’s – had been destroyed on the ground.

While most of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were fighting the Egyptians and Jordanians, a small group of soldiers were left to defend the northern border against the Syrians. It

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was not until the Jordanian and Egyptian forces were defeated that the IDF was able to send reinforcements to the Golan Heights, where Syrian gunners held control of the strategic high ground. On June 9, after two days of heavy air bombardment, Israeli forces succeeded in breaking through Syrian lines.

It took only three days for the Israeli forces to defeat the reputable Jordanian legions. So on the morning of June 7, the order was given to recapture the Old City of Jerusalem. Israeli paratroopers stormed the city and secured it before Defense Minister Moshe Dayan arrived with Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin to formally mark the Jewish people's return to their historic capital and their holiest site.

In just six days, Israel went from defending herself from complete annihilation to reunifying Jerusalem and capturing the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. The world was stunned. Israeli troops marched to the Western Wall, the last remaining wall of those encircling the ancient Jewish Temple Mount, and Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren blew a shofar to celebrate the return of the people of Israel to the heart of the Land of Israel – to Jerusalem.

The victory of the Six-Day War bordered on the miraculous. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of the State of Israel, summed it up best when he said: “In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.”¹¹

“The Six-Day War was a miracle. It was as if the heavens themselves opened up to defend the people of Israel.”
(Golda Meir, third prime minister of Israel)

To me, that is Jewish history in a nutshell.

JEWISH IMMORTALITY

In 1892, the great American writer and poet Mark Twain famously asked: “The Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests the nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be

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heard of.... The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"¹²

If I may be so bold as to offer an answer to Mark Twain's question, *What is the secret of his immortality?*, my simple response is "God." To me, it is all but impossible to explain Jewish history without believing in a higher force ensuring Jewish survival throughout the ages. To be sure, we can rationally explain any one of the above-mentioned instances of Jewish survival, be it the expulsion of Greek forces from ancient Judea or the salvation of Persian Jewry, without having to acknowledge a supernatural force. But to explain the *totality* of Jewish his-

tory – how one nation could survive *all* these attempts at its destruction – one has little choice but to concede that some other force is at work.

The Jewish belief in God is a belief not merely in a God of creation but also in a God of history – that God is actively involved in the affairs of the world.

The continued survival of the Jewish people against all odds demonstrates God's involvement, for as history attests, time and again, when a minority group lives within a different majority culture, the minority people eventually vanish, due to

KABBALAH CORNER:

God is *sovev kol almin*, meaning that He surrounds the universe. But since God is infinite, He is not bound by the changes that occur within the finite laws of nature, such as changes between seasons. Simultaneously, He is *memalei kol almin*, filling the world so He can establish an intimate relationship with each of His creations. (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Chasidism)



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either physical annihilation or cultural assimilation. For over two thousand years, the Jewish people lived as a miniscule, counter-cultural minority within dozens of Diaspora countries and came uncomfortably close to both annihilation and assimilation. But neither happened. How? Is the Jewish people's continued survival simply a coincidence, a fluke of history?

AM YISRAEL CHAI: THE JEWISH PEOPLE LIVE!

But the Jews have not simply survived. Despite the years and intensity of persecution, the Jews have contributed to the world in a way vastly disproportionate to their small numbers. Despite the fact that the Jewish people consist of less than one-fifth of 1 percent of the world population, they have won 22 percent of all Nobel Prizes.¹³ In virtually every field of human endeavor – science, law, medicine, and philosophy – Jews are consistently at the forefront. Jews have not simply endured; they have excelled. Some joke that three of the four thinkers who most influenced twentieth-century Western thought were Jewish – and the fourth was wrong!¹⁴

You do not need to be a religious person to recognize that some other power is at work – a force which ensured that the Jews escaped Egyptian slavery, repelled the Greeks, and survived the Babylonian, Persian, and Roman Empires and their powerful armies.



Arch of Titus ▀

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I was overwhelmed by this thought when I first visited the famous Arch of Titus in Rome. The arch depicts the Roman legionnaires carrying the vessels of the Jewish Temple they had just destroyed, as they marched the defeated Jews into exile and slavery. It was honestly a depressing image to behold. But then I noticed something which made me smile. The Hebrew phrase *Am Yisrael Chai* – “The Jewish people live!” – was spray-painted on the adjacent wall. This phrase, no doubt written by an Israeli tourist withchutzpah, is the Jewish response to millennia of persecution. The Arch of Titus celebrates the power of the ancient Roman Empire and their defeat of the Jewish people. But that was two thousand years ago. Today the Roman Empire is no longer, and the Jewish people live and thrive in Israel and throughout the world.

How can one explain the continued existence of the Jewish people? How does tiny Israel continue to blossom with so many powerful enemies on her borders?

“Israel is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are constantly upon it from the beginning of the year to the end.” (Deuteronomy 11:12)

How, in six days, did Israel manage to triple its size in a completely defensive war? A war in which soldiers – among them self-avowed secularists – claimed they saw miracles and found themselves praying at the Western Wall when it was all over!

Imagine if we could travel back in time and tell the great Pharaohs of Egypt that thousands of years later it wouldn’t be Egypt that would survive, but the people they enslaved.

Imagine if we could tell the Caesars of Rome that their powerful legions would not stand the test of time, but instead it would be the small minority they oppressed and whose Temple they destroyed.

Imagine if Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler could see the hundreds of thousands of Jewish children today attending Jewish schools or the many Jews who gather every Friday night

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to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, while Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany lie consigned to the dustbin of history.

“Surveying the breathtaking landscape of Jewish history, we know this: that those who sought to destroy the people of the covenant gather dust in the museums of mankind while *am Yisrael chai*, the people Israel lives.”
(Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

BIBLICAL PREDICTIONS COME TRUE

Perhaps most remarkable, the Bible predicted that the Jews would survive for eternity. In describing the covenant God forged with the Jews, the Bible states: “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”¹⁵ The Italian sage Rabbi Ovadia Sforno understands the phrase “a holy nation” to mean an immortal nation never to disappear from the stage of history.¹⁶ As to the phrase “a kingdom of priests,” Sforno explains this too along similar lines: Just as the *kohanim* (the Jewish priests) were selected to be the teachers within the Jewish community, so too, among the nations of the world, the Jewish people were selected to be teachers in regard to monotheism and its values. In other words, to the extent that the Jewish people fulfill their mission to be “a kingdom of priests,” their survival is guaranteed.

Later in the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah, in expressing God’s vision, declares: “For I will bring annihilation upon all the nations among whom I have dispersed you, but upon you I will not bring annihilation.”¹⁷ Jeremiah continues: “If these laws [of nature] should ever be annulled by Me – declares the Lord – only then would the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time.”¹⁸ Finally, Malachi, the last prophet of the Bible, declared: “For I am the Lord – I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob – you have not ceased to be.”¹⁹ The biblical commentator Radak explains this verse to mean that the Jewish people will not be destroyed “like the other nations” even though they may be “exiled and driven to every corner of the world.”²⁰