

WHY BE JEWISH?

Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky, Executive Director of Big Tent Judaism/Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI), located in New York City

1. **As a Jew, the collective story of the Jewish people becomes my personal story.** My own life's story contributes to the collective memory of the Jewish people. The Jewish historical narrative of the Jewish people evolves as the Jewish people march forward in history and will eventually bring us into the messianic period.
2. **The doing of *mitzvot* brings me closer to the Divine.** In the refracted Divine light, I am able to see myself more clearly.
3. **The emphasis of deed over creed encourages the individual (irrespective of personal belief or doubts of faith) to help build a better world through acts of social justice (*tikkun olam*)** and provides the individual with a variety of opportunities to do so. The doing of these good deeds, which emerge from a foundation of positive Jewish values, brings me closer to others and to humanity.
4. **The affirmation of one God is the unity principle that is the foundation of Jewish faith.** Judaism encourages questioning and debate. Faith comes through struggle. The result of this struggle helps to define Jewish theology.
5. **The Jewish community provides support to the individual (and family) during life's liminal moments,** including those times in which we soar, as well as those that bring us into the deepest, darkest moments of our lives.
6. **Judaism transforms daily routine (the long haul of life) into sacred moments and sacred opportunities,** especially through the application of ritual, helping to moor us in what is sometimes an anchorless world.
7. **Judaism emphasizes lifelong educational growth of all kinds.** Jewish education helps us to morally navigate the world. (The Talmud requires

parents to teach their children “how to swim.”) Judaism also provides a framework for teaching children their moral responsibility to the world.

8. **Judaism has a variety of spiritual disciplines that elevate the soul**, including daily prayer, the study of sacred texts, dietary standards, and Shabbat (the Sabbath).
9. **The beauty of Judaism and the accomplishments of the Jewish people foster Jewish pride**, as well as a connection to fellow Jews that transcends any geographic border or time and space.
10. **Jews have a home in Israel**. Its capital, Jerusalem, is the center of the Jewish spiritual world, where according to rabbinic teaching, is the place where heaven and earth touch.

Rabbi Adam Chalom, Ph.D., Dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism for North America and rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, Illinois.

WE NEED new ideas about why be Jewish, why stay Jewish, why become Jewish, why connect with things Jewish. Let me share three reasons that have been compelling to me.

First: Jewish is as Jewish does. Judaism is a rich and varied and long tradition that has seen everything from rational philosophy to animal sacrifice to mystical exploration, hereditary kings and priests giving way to rabbis and religious law, multiple languages sharing the same alphabet, and art and creativity celebrated in one corner of the Jewish world while condemned in another. At times we are inspired by our legacy; at times we are alienated. Ultra-Orthodox Jews and Secular Humanistic Jews are both Jewish — if each of us contains multitudes, so, too, does Judaism.

There is something for everyone, every learning style, every intelligence, every aptitude and interest. This is the beauty of celebrating Judaism as a culture: no

matter what you believe, there's always something for you. We can even find a defense of our own challenges to tradition from within our tradition, as in the Jewish tradition of integrity, exemplified by those Jews during Inquisition and pogrom who would not say words they did not believe.

Second: Be a Jew, be a *mensch*. The Yiddish word *mensch* means simply a person, but the best kind of person. I am *not* saying that every Jew is automatically a *mensch*, nor that deep study of Judaism will automatically make you one; rabbis are arrested for crimes, too. I do not believe that Jews invented or have a monopoly on ethics.

Nevertheless, there are values articulated in Jewish culture that we celebrate:

An emphasis on literacy and learning that we have broadened to include both men and women and secularized beyond the Talmud.

An ethic of community responsibility and mutual support, combined with a work ethic of individual success.

Jews have often celebrated brains over brawn, a welcome respite from today's athlete worship and sometimes violent militarism.

We have found humor as an antidote to the dashed promises of faith: when life doesn't turn out as you expect, you can laugh or cry, and we have done both.

We have our failings, but that makes us human. An example: traditionally the High Holidays were not only about divine forgiveness, but also human forgiveness — not just asking for forgiveness from someone else, but being willing to offer forgiveness when a sincere apology is made. This means making yourself available to someone who has wronged you to give them the opportunity to make it right. Is that easy? Not at all. But how wonderful that our tradition explored how hard it can be to repair relationships through human atonement.

Other traditions have their lessons. So too, does Judaism. Be a Jew, be a *mensch*.

Third: Be a Jewish citizen of the world. In the last few centuries, Jews have become a prototype of the globalized identity — living within and fluent in other cultures, but still distinct and separate in some ways. *Jews are a world people*

speaking different languages, but possessing a common identity beyond that of their city or country.

Sometimes that gives us an outsider's perspective and lets us challenge conventions, like Freud's theories on sex or Einstein's on relativity. At all times it gives us the ability to think beyond our personal identity, since we have always had more than one.

Because of this dual identity, Jews have been accused of being "rootless cosmopolitans," citizens of the world, with no allegiance to the people among whom they lived. The more that people circulate in a global economy, the more the world will need rooted cosmopolitans, people who have a global perspective and awareness, but still know who they are and where they come from. If you are Jewish, if you've become Jewish, that rootedness can find deep origins in the Jewish experience, and so can that universal perspective.

IN THE END, I suspect that I am still Jewish because I am stubborn, and that is definitely a Jewish tradition. We have called ourselves a stiff-necked people, and we can be a pain in the neck. Being stubborn has kept the Jews around. You do not get to tell me that I do not get to be Jewish. I am still here and I am still Jewish because I am going to fight for the right to be who I am, on my own terms. If you won't accept me, if you don't think that I am Jewish or you don't think what I do is Judaism, that's your problem, not mine. Even those Jewish teachings I reject — chauvinism, anti-feminism, insularity — they are skeletons in my closet, knots on my family tree. It's good to be passionate about things in life; why not this?

Rabbi Adam Rosenwasser – Temple Emanuel in Kensington, MD

I believe there are three main reasons to be Jewish in America in 2019.

First. Judaism helps us understand ourselves. It provides values and guidance for how we should live our lives and what we can do to make life meaningful. For me, the practice of Mussar has been a game changer. Mussar is the study of middot, character traits, and I know many of you here this morning has engaged in this study of the soul. Mussar teaches that we have an inner, divine spark but that

spark is often hidden by the obstacles we face in our lives. Mussar acknowledges our flaws, but then compels us to examine them.

After deep reflection, we practice exercises that will help us cultivate better character traits and healthier habits. If we find that we take up too much space at work, we talk too much, we don't listen to others, and we are not good collaborators, then our middah of humility, needs attention.

We keep a journal of our experiences, and we try out different methods of behavioral change. We may decide only to speak once during a meeting. We may put on an outfit that is less colorful. We may decide to purposely sit at the back of the room.

Through outer experiences, the Mussar masters teach that we can improve our souls. Mussar is one way that Judaism can help us better understand ourselves and guide us to make real change in our lives.

The second reason to be Jewish today is that it provides us with community. I teach my conversion students that you cannot be Jewish on a desert island. We depend on one another. There are countless examples. To say most prayers requires a minyan of 10 people. A *Beit Din*, a rabbinic court, must include three judges. Two witnesses are required in matters of legal proceedings. Judaism includes with it a built-in community. Being a Jew means you should never be alone.

The third reason to be Jewish is that it provides us an essential task and purpose, to mend the world. You only have to turn to the Bible to hear the plea of the prophet, imploring us to take care of the vulnerable among us and to turn from evil toward the good. Being Jewish means you should never be satisfied with how the world is and that we look instead to how the world could be.

Why be Jewish is a question we should ask ourselves throughout our lives. I believe Judaism can provide each of us with a light to shine out into this dark world.

New York Times columnist Bari Weiss

“To fight antisemitism be a proud Jew.... these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful, and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul—and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours.”

Edmund Fleg was a French poet and writer and essayist. He was raised in an unobservant household and did not think too much of his faith growing up. But then, in 1894, he witnessed the anti-Semitic events of the Dreyfuss affair

This awakened something in Fleg and propelled him to discover and connect with his Jewish identity. In 1927, as he found out he was going to become a grandfather for the first time, Edmund Fleg wrote this letter to his unborn grandson:

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel asks every possible sacrifice of my soul.

I am a Jew because in all places where there are tears and suffering the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the message of Israel is the most ancient and the most modern.

I am a Jew because Israel’s promise is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because for Israel the world is not finished; we are completing it.

I am a Jew because for Israel humanity is not yet fully created; we are creating it.

I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its unity above nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because above humanity, image of the divine unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.