

What a Jew Believes - Practicing Faith in a Skeptical World

Session 2

"The Jewish People - Chosen - But Why? And for what?"



Part One - Jewish Survival as a proof of God's existence?

“There is no greater sign and proof than our survival of nearly two thousand years of Exile. The only reason for our survival is because of Hashem’s Hashgacha (divine providence) that is not removed from us even for a moment like a father who watches over his only child and chastises him for the latter’s benefit.”

1. Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 1:10)

It is certain that in certain parts of the world we can see a peculiar people, separated from the other peoples of the world, and this is called the Jewish people... This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singularly long time... For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens and Rome, and others who came so much later have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out, as their historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things over such a long spell of years. They have

always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold... My encounter with his people amazes me.

2. Blaise Pascal

כֹּה אָמַר ה' נִתְּנוּ שְׁמַשׁ לְאֹר יוֹמָם חֻקֵּי יָרֵחַ וְכּוֹכָבִים לְאֹר לַיְלָה רִגְעֵי הַיָּם וַיִּהְיוּ גִלְיוֹ יִהְיֶה צְבָאוֹת שְׁמוֹ:

Thus said the LORD, Who established the sun for light by day, The laws of moon and stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is LORD of Hosts:

אִם-יִמְשׁוּ הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה מִלְּפָנַי נְאֻם-ה' גַּם זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁבֹּת וְיִמְהִיּוּת גּוֹי לְפָנַי כְּלַיְמָיִם: (ס)

If these laws 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.

3. Jeremiah 31, 35-36

וְהָיָה כִּי-יָבֹאוּ עָלֶיךָ כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל-לְבָבְךָ בְּכָל-הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִדִּיחֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה: וְשָׁבַת עַד-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעַתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּךָ הַיּוֹם אַתָּה וּבְנֶיךָ בְּכָל-לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ: וְשָׁב ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-שְׁבוּתֶךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשָׁב וּקְבַצְךָ מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְיָצְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה: אִם-יִהְיֶה נִדְחֶךָ בְּקִצְהָ הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשָּׁם יִקְבְּצֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּמִשָּׁם יִקְחֶךָ:

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, from there He will fetch you.

4. Devarim 30, 1-4

That which God states here, "So devastated will I leave the land that your enemies..." constitutes a good tidings, proclaiming that during all our exiles, our land will not accept our enemies. This is a great proof and assurance for us, for in the entire inhabited world one cannot find such a good and large land which was always lived in, and yet is as ruined as it is [today]. For from the time we left it, it has not accepted any nation or people; they all try to settle it, but to no avail.

5. Nachmanides Commentary on the Torah, Vayikra 26:16

Part Two - Why Did God Choose Us?

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לְךָ-לֶךְ מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאךָ: וְאָעֲשֶׂיךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאַבְרָכְךָ וְאֶגְדְּלָהּ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: וְאַבְרָכָהּ מִבְּרַכְיֶיךָ וּמִקְלֶיךָ אֲאָר וּנְבָרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחַת הָאֲדָמָה:

The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you."

6. Bereishit 12, 1-3

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה' אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים לָתֵת לְךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

Then He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession."

7. Bereshit 15,7

וַעֲתָה ה' אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים כִּי-לִי כָּל-הָאָרֶץ: וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיוּ-לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֵל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."

8. Shemot 19, 5-6

God created humanity with the hope that man would recognize his Creator and acknowledge Him. He gave man the exclusive ability to choose good or evil. When all of them willfully transgressed and denied Him, only one nation remained associated with His name... If God then acts to destroy the people of Israel, then the nations will forget His signs and deeds and will never recount them, and any historical success of the Jews will be regarded as passing fortune. Thus, the purpose of creation and of man will be negated, for none will remain to acknowledge their Creator, but only to anger Him! Therefore, it becomes necessary for God to preserve the people of Israel forever, for they are the closest people to Him, who acknowledge Him more than any other nation.

9. Ramban Devarim 32,31

We are a chosen people, not a master race. We were chosen to be the trustees of God's Torah, and this is why we must survive as a people, even if it entails walking a dangerous path in this world. Just as a commandment is best fulfilled when a Jew understands why God gave each commandment the way he did, so the Jews' chosenness is best lived for—and died for—when we understand the uniquely divine purpose for which God chose us.

10. David Novac, University of Toronto

Part Three - Judaism - Hope of Mankind

As to your question about the nations, know that the Lord desires the heart, and that the intention of the heart is the measure of all things. That is why our sages say, "The pious among the nations have a share in the world to come", namely, if they have acquired what can be acquired of the knowledge of G-d, and if they ennoble their souls with worthy qualities. There is no doubt that every man who ennobles his soul with excellent morals and wisdom based on the faith in G-d, certainly belongs to those destined for the world to come. That is why our sages said, "Even a non-Jew who studies the Torah of our teacher Moses is like a high priest."

11. Rambam, Letter to Hasdai haLevi

But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Mohammed) who came after him, only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written: For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent (Zeph. 3:9). Thus the Messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become familiar topics—topics of conversation (among the inhabitants) of the far isles and many peoples, uncircumcised of heart and flesh.

12. Rambam, Laws of Kings, Chapter 12

It was on the very place on which the degeneration of mankind appeared in the highest degree that God allowed the return of his Shechina to occur. This can well tell us that although the nature of a country is indeed not without influence on the tendencies and disposition of its inhabitants, the achievement of "nearness to God" is equally within the reach of the Lapp in Lapland as to that of the Greek in Greece. There where an Abraham lived murderers can also live, and the same soil can bear a prophet next to a murderer. It was just that land which is so seductive that on it its inhabitants became so debauched in voluptuous luxury that the very land itself "spued them out", just that land God chose to plant therein His People - who themselves are not the most tractable, whose fundamental character is that of 'a stiff necked people'. So that if the Divine Fire of Torah would succeed - as it did succeed - in winning over this people on this land to itself, then there can be no race of mankind in no land whatsoever who can not be won to (Torah).

13. R Samson Raphael Hirsh to Bereshit 12,6

Secondly, in the Dispersion, we were a minority – disempowered and scattered throughout the world. It is the people who are vulnerable, who are exposed, who are at risk. On them, God shows His special love. That is why the treatment of the Jews in history has always been a litmus test of the humanity of any age. It is why the Jewish story has always been a great narrative of hope. And that is why it spoke to the founding fathers of America. Why it spoke to the black civil rights activists who were trying to create a space for themselves in America. Because the Jewish story was always of a people who were vulnerable, small, weak, exposed, afraid – and yet who never lost hope. And, as a result, never ceased to be.

That is why the Jewish story, in its unique particularity, is the human story in its universality. If we would have been everyone in general, we would never have been somebody in particular. And if we hadn't somebody in particular, we would never have a message for humanity in general.

THE day will come, when the story of Israel in modern times will speak not just to Jews, but to all who believe in the power of the human spirit as it reaches out to God, as an everlasting symbol of the victory of life over death, hope over despair. Israel has achieved great things. It has taken a barren land and made it bloom again. It's taken an ancient language, the Hebrew of the Bible, and made it speak again. It's taken the West's oldest faith and made it young again. Israel has taken a tattered, shattered nation and made it live again. Israel is the country whose national anthem, Hatikva, means hope. Israel is the home of hope.

14. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Part Four - What does G-d ask of the Jewish People?

My mercy and love for my brother [my fellow Jew] should be exactly like the mercy and love I have for myself; [specifically in regards to] his money, physical welfare, and everything that will ever be in his possession or he will want. And, everything that I wish for myself, I should desire for him. [Conversely,] anything that I would hate for myself or for anyone who associates with me, I should find hateful to him in the exact same fashion. This is what the Torah stated: "... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself

15. Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot

A Jew who has lost his faith in Knesset Israel, even though he may personally sanctify and purify himself by being strict in his observance of the precepts and by assuming prohibitions upon himself – such a Jew is incorrigible and is totally unfit to join in the day of Atonement which encompasses the whole of *Knesset Israel*, in all its components and all its generations. Only the Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* may partake of the sanctity of the Day and the acquittal granted to him as part of the community of Israel. The Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* is the Jew who lives as part of it wherever it is and is willing to give his life for it, feels its pain, rejoices with it, fights in its wars, groans at its defeats and celebrates its victories. The Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* is a Jew who binds himself with inseverable bonds not only to the People of Israel of his own generation but to the community of Israel throughout the ages. How so? Through the Torah which embodies the spirit and the destiny of Israel from generation to generation unto eternity.

16. Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik

The growing inclination among liberal Jews to de-emphasize Jewish distinctiveness is the gravest threat to the future of liberal Judaism. For what are the prospects of the continuity of the people if the people are not committed to their own continuity — and do not even agree philosophically that their collective peoplehood is a legitimate objective and a social good? Is it possible to sustain the Jewish people without being committed to the Jewish people? Can Judaism survive without Jews?

17. R Ammiel Hirsch

We contend that Paul and the first Apostles, and subsequently the Church Fathers, took advantage of the vacuum that developed in the western diaspora as a result of the fact that it was cut off from the hierarchical systems of administration and communication of the eastern Jewish community. They worked toward spreading their beliefs in the western Jewish diaspora. It is a fact that Paul never considered going eastward, and that the only population that he thought might possibly accept his teachings was the Jews of the Greek-speaking diaspora (Mendels 1998: 394-419). Greek-speaking Jews who became part of the western diaspora could easily have perceived Paul, who was a student of R. Gamliel I, as a rabbi who came to teach the Oral Law. The big advantage for Paul, and consequently the Church Fathers, was that they taught in Greek. Paul's ability to enter the public sphere of the Jewish community via the synagogue was related to the fact that these Jews were spiritually cut off from the center in the Land of Israel and from Babylonia:

18. Edrei & Mendles, "A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences"

"Our survey of three and a half millennia of Jewish history is closed. But the story which we have set ourselves to tell is unended. Today the Jewish people has in it still those elements of strength and endurance which enabled it to surmount all of the crises of its past, surviving thus the most powerful empires of antiquity. Throughout our history, there have been weaker elements who have shirked the sacrifices which Judaism entails; they have been swallowed up, long since, in the great majority. Only the more stalwart have carried on the traditions of their ancestors and can now look back with pride in their superb heritage. Are we to be numbered with the weak majority or the stalwart minority? It is of course, for ourselves, to decide, but in a reading of Jewish history, one factor emerges which may perhaps help us in our decision: the preservation of the Jew was certainly not casual. He has endured through the power of a certain ideal, based upon the recognition of the influence of a higher power in human affairs. Indeed, time after time in his history he has been saved from disaster in a manner which cannot be described as anything but providential. This author has deliberately attempted to write this book in a secular spirit, but he does not think that his readers can fail to see on every page, a higher immanence."

19. Cecil Roth