

# WHY BE *Jewish* IN A TIME OF CRISIS?



## BIG IDEA

Why *Why Be Jewish?* We believe that conversation is as important to Friday night as elevated ritual and delicious food, yet it often gets the least amount of attention as we prepare for Shabbat. Asking this question *Why Be Jewish?* can be a revelatory opportunity to go deeper, learn more, and leave the table not only full but fulfilled.

This guide is the first in a series that invites you to explore the question *Why Be Jewish?* in three different contexts:

### WHY BE JEWISH IN A TIME OF CRISIS?

Explore the ways in which Jewish learning and practice can inform your response to the most pressing challenges of the moment.

### WHY BE JEWISH: A PERSONAL RESPONSE

Explore your individual lived experience as a Jewish young adult by elevating your family and personal narratives.

### WHY BE JEWISH: A COMMUNAL RESPONSE

Explore the tension between the universal and the particular, by breaking down the false dichotomy of competing communal allegiances.

Driven by current events, *Why Be Jewish in a Time of Crisis?* is the most topical of the guides, designed to evolve over time. What will not change is its focus on elevating learning and ritual to imbue even the most challenging moments with Jewish meaning.

There will be as many answers to *Why Be Jewish?* as there are guests, and that's exactly as it should be. Our strength, as individuals and as a Jewish community, is in our willingness to ask the question.

# Welcome

## RITUAL CONNECTION

Whether this is the first time you've considered the question *Why Be Jewish?* or the first time in a long time, Jewish practice offers a blessing for this moment: the *Shehecheyanu*.

Crises create boundaries; *Shehecheyanu* transcends them.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam shehecheyanu v'kiyamanu v'higianu laz'man hazeh.*

Blessed is the Oneness that inspires the universe, sustains us, raises us up, and has enabled us to reach this season.

## REST STOP

### Why Be Jewish?

*Have you ever asked yourself this question before?  
What about yourself and your life do you identify as "Jewish"?*

### Why Be Jewish in a Time of Crisis?

*How does your reaction to the Why Be Jewish? question change, if at all, when you consider crisis situations?*

## TAKEAWAY

Judaism is about the questions, not the answers  
and Shabbat is the perfect time to ask.

# Light

Shabbat enters with learning and with light.

## BIG IDEA

In Jewish tradition, we light candles at times of joy such as Shabbat and Hanukkah, but we also light candles to commemorate loss. With this in mind, we offer one of many answers to the question Why be Jewish in a Time of Crisis? — the potency of ritual, its ability to give purpose to our pain. Because loss is a crisis, no matter the scale.

## RITUAL CONNECTION

Loss is a crisis, no matter the scale. As you light, we invite you to give voice to the name of someone you have lost, someone whose light you miss, someone whose memory you want to evoke tonight. Together, these names will elevate the ritual of creating light with a specific kavanah, an intention and meaning beyond its symbolism.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו להדליק נר של שבת.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Blessed is the Oneness that makes us holy through commandments and commands us to kindle the light of Shabbat.

## REST STOP

Consider the past week. The past month. The past year. What are some of the ways you have responded to loss, to sadness, to isolation, to fear — with light?

## TAKEAWAY

To be Jewish is to embrace both the old and the innovative. In times of crisis, Jewish ritual gives us tools to imbue an ancient practice with modern meaning.

# Wine

We raise our glass to sanctify Shabbat.

## BIG IDEA

The ritual of *Kiddush*, literally *sanctification*, uses wine to mark time: this night, this table, these people, this conversation, this Shabbat is special, unique, and will never happen in exactly this way again. But we are not perfect and our week was not perfect, and in order to raise a glass to the weekend, we have to put down something from the week that has passed.

In times of crisis, it is easy to despair. A broken world, a broken life, a broken heart — to be Jewish is to imagine these are not ends but opportunities. Beauty can result from brokenness if we seek change, if we take action, if we learn from our mistakes. Being Jewish in a time crisis is a responsibility. We cannot turn away. Rather we must name the brokenness in our world and in ourselves.

## RITUAL CONNECTION

*So much depends upon us and our intention. All of those intentions fill the Kiddush cup to overflowing. They are the moments of brokenness that we bring from the week that has passed. They are gathered into the cup of blessing, and they are lifted up in the moment of Kiddush. — Dr. Eitan Fishbane*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן. ברוך אתה יי מקדש השבת.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam borei p'ri ha'gafen. Baruch Atah Adonai m'kadesh ha'Shabbat.*

Blessed is the Oneness that creates the fruit of the vine. Blessed is the Oneness that sanctifies Shabbat.

## REST STOP

*What brokenness in our world do you feel must be addressed immediately? Over the next ten years? Over your lifetime?*

*In what ways has being Jewish uniquely prepared you to address these challenges?*

*What are the most compelling challenges facing the Jewish community in the 21st century?*

*What frustrates you most about being Jewish in a time of crisis, or about the Jewish communal response to crisis?*

## TAKEAWAY

The sacred reality of *Kiddush* is that there is room enough in our cup for both blessing and the brokenness.

# Bread

We are not physical creatures having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual creatures having a physical experience. — Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

## BIG IDEA

When read closely, the blessing over bread — an acknowledgment of the Power greater than ourselves that brings forth bread from the earth — doesn't make sense. Regardless of personal theology, bread isn't "brought forth from the earth." There are no bread trees. We clear fields, plant, harvest, and mill. We bake, package, and sell. Countless hours of work have gone into these loaves before they reach our table.

This is what we are called to elevate as Jews: the Oneness, the interconnectedness, the shared responsibility of nourishment. There is joy in the creation of bread, but there is also strain. In order to create a spiritual connection to the product, the bread on our table, Jewish practice invites us to acknowledge the labor that has gone into its production.

## RITUAL CONNECTION

It is a common arc of Jewish ritual — even as we celebrate we recall moments of hardship. We should never, even at our most joyful moments, forget crises of suffering. This is why we break a glass at weddings, to make space for brokenness even as we rejoice. And according to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great 16th century Kabbalist, this is why we so often have salt present when we bless bread at the Shabbat dinner table.

Challah is sweet, a symbol of kindness. Its sweetness is tempered when, after saying *ha'motzi*, the blessing over the bread, we touch our piece of challah ever so slightly to the salt, a symbol of severity.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, המוציא לחם מן הארץ.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam ha'motzi lechem min ha'aretz.*

Blessed is the Oneness that brings forth bread from the earth.

## REST STOP

*To what extent do you feel connected to other Jews in general? In times of crisis?*

Consider your own volunteerism and/or financial donations.

*Do you support Jewish organizations (i.e. those that address crises that impact the Jewish community), Jewish organizations that address universal crises (e.g. the Jewish Climate Action Network), or general organizations that address universal crises (e.g. Doctors without Borders)? Do you feel tension as you consider how to best direct your limited resources?*

*Do you agree with the ritual trope of making space for suffering at times of joy? Would weddings be better without broken glass? Would challah be better without salt? Do we really need both?*

## TAKEAWAY

Even as Judaism invites us to create elevated spiritual practices, we are required to remain rooted in the realities of our world, no matter how harsh.

# Gratitude

When you have eaten and are satisfied, bless.

## BIG IDEA

An essential part of the experience of gratitude is the recognition of self as blessing.

*And Jacob blessed his sons; each according to their abilities he blessed them. — Genesis 49:28*

*Why does the Torah teach that Jacob blessed his sons according to their abilities? Because blessings are not ambiguous spiritual gifts, rather they should add abundance to what is already there.*

— Nefesh Ha'Chaim

## RITUAL CONNECTION

Shabbat is an opportunity to elevate important issues, to engage in the sacred work of conversation as we have tonight. And Shabbat is a time for sacred self-care, a time to step away from the work of repairing the world to do the work of repairing the soul.

*May the Source of strength  
Who blessed the ones before us  
Help us find the courage  
To make our lives a blessing.  
— Debbie Friedman*

## REST STOP

*Do not be arrogant; do not think that you alone can finish the job. Trust in your children. Know that you are part of the living chain of people who have dreamed, worked for a better world, and carried on this mission for thousands of years. Judaism requires a partnership between the generations. Each generation will improve the world as far as it can. Then it must educate its children and pass on the mission to the next generation, until the goal is reached. — Rabbi Yitz Greenberg*

Consider your parents and grandparents. Consider past teachers. Consider Jewish figures who have set the stage for us, who have broken boundaries, who have influenced the practice and purpose not only of Judaism but of science, medicine, psychology, activism, economics, and human rights to name but a few.

*In times of crisis, what inspires gratitude in you?  
What are the blessings — the good in the world that already exists — that you might seek to elevate?  
What might it mean for you, as a Jewish citizen of the world, to make your life a blessing?  
So many have come before us. We have inherited so much. Who inspires you to continue to do the work?*

## TAKEAWAY

All the more so in times of crisis, to be Jewish is to remember to nurture and nourish ourselves, to honor the blessings within and elevate them. Shabbat Shalom.

It is not your responsibility to finish the  
work of perfecting the world, nor are you  
free to desist from it.

— Pirkei Avot 2:21

*It is our deepest wish that your conversation tonight be a source of blessing, that you conclude  
with a richer sense of self, and a deeper connection to each other and the Jewish world.*

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