

# WHY BE Jewish

## A PERSONAL RESPONSE



### BIG IDEA

While many explain what Judaism is about, there is less discussion of why it is so vital to our lives today. At OneTable, we believe that deep conversations like these are as important to Friday night as elevated ritual and delicious food, yet conversation often gets the least amount of attention as we prepare for the meal. Asking the question *Why Be Jewish?* at the Shabbat dinner table is a revelatory opportunity to go deeper, learn more, and leave the table not only full but fulfilled.

This guide is the second 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 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.

***As a Jew, the collective story of the Jewish people becomes my personal story, and my own life's story contributes to the collective memory of the Jewish people.***— Rabbi Kerry Olitzky

This guide is an invitation to tell your story, to listen to the stories of others, and to add these narratives to the ongoing discourse of the Jewish people.

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*.

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

**If you had to describe what it means to be Jewish to someone who knows nothing about Judaism, what would you say?**



## TAKEAWAY

Our personal portraits are a part of the Jewish narrative; this ongoing story of a people depends on our story of self.

# Light

The human soul is the candle of God. — Proverbs 20:27

## BIG IDEA

A group of students traveled to spend Shabbat with a wise Rabbi. At the Friday night meal one asked, "Rabbi, what is a Jew?" The Rabbi replied, "A Jew is a lamplighter. The lamplighter walks through life carrying a flame, going from lamp to lamp to set them alight." The students considered the Rabbi's answer. Then one asked, "What if the lamp is in a desert?" "Then you must go to the desert and light it," said the Rabbi. Another asked, "What if the lamp is at sea?" "Then you must dive into the sea and light it," said the Rabbi. "This is a Jew?" the students asked again. The Rabbi said, "Yes, this is a Jew." The students sat quietly. At last one said, "But Rabbi, I don't see any lamps!" The Rabbi replied, "That is because you are not yet a lamplighter." "How do I become a lamplighter?" the student asked. "Start with yourself. Only when you see the light within yourself will you see the lamp within your fellow."

## RITUAL CONNECTION

On Shabbat, the light within everyone and everything is revealed. We need only the will to see it.  
— Sfat Emet

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

**Was there a religious or spiritual background to your childhood?**

## TAKEAWAY

When we take the time to articulate our Jewish story and share it, we strengthen the light within ourselves, and inspire light in others.

# Wine

We raise our glass to sanctify Shabbat.

## BIG IDEA

In many faith traditions, only gods have the power to sanctify, to make something holy. But in Judaism, we, human beings, are able to sanctify time. It is a radical idea. The ritual of Kiddush, literally sanctification, gives us a template to name that this night is holy, this time is sacred, this experience of Friday night will be different from the other six nights of the week.

## RITUAL CONNECTION

It is no coincidence then, that the full Kiddush includes a reference to the Exodus from Egypt, the story we tell every year on Passover. Is it not enough to celebrate liberation at an annual holiday? Why do we need a weekly Shabbat ritual to recall redemption?

Rabbi Diane Cohler-Esses teaches that this point in the Torah marks an incredible shift in the narrative of the Jewish people. Before the Exodus, we are told a story. After the Exodus, we become actors in the story.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְרִי הַגֶּפֶן.  
כִּי הוּא יוֹם תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ וְזֵכֶר לְיִצְיַאת מִצְרַיִם.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי מְקַדֵּשׁ הַשַּׁבָּת.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam borei p'ri ha'gafen.  
Ki hu yom tehilah l'mikra'ei kodesh zecher litziat Mitzrayim.  
Baruch Atah Adonai m'kadesh ha'Shabbat.*

Blessed is the Oneness that creates the fruit of the vine.  
As first among our sacred days, it recalls liberation from Egypt.

Blessed is the Oneness that sanctifies Shabbat.

## REST STOP

**What, if any, relationship do you have with God or a sense of the Divine?  
Where or when do you feel closest to God?**

## TAKEAWAY

Kiddush celebrates our role as storytellers, as narrators of our own lives.  
We are free to act, free to bless, free to sanctify.

# Bread

On Shabbat, challah represents a taste of tikkun olam, the possibility of a world restored. — The Maharal of Prague

## BIG IDEA

*Our Shabbat table gives us a taste of the world's Jewish stories. Here are four more to share.*

Djerba, a small Tunisian island, has been a Shabbat oasis since the first Jews arrived here 2600 years ago during the Babylonian Exile. More than 500 years ago, Spanish Jews pursued by the Inquisition joined the earlier refugees. Once, the village of Hara Kebira was exclusively populated by Jews. Even today, 700 Jews live here — a majority of the inhabitants. Hara Kebira is not only the last predominantly Jewish village on the island, it is the last one in North Africa.

The Jews of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, say their ancestors originally arrived here shortly after the destruction of the First Temple. The Bukharian Emir gave the Jewish immigrants Mahalla, a neighborhood where they lived with relative autonomy for centuries and maintained Jewish traditions. Before the Communist Revolution, Bukhara had 18 synagogues. Today, as a result of emigration to Israel and America, of the 20,000 Jews who once filled Mahalla's streets, only hundreds remain.

The town of Moises Ville is a 10-hour bus ride north-west from Buenos Aires into the Argentinean Pampas. The founders brought nothing when they came in 1889 and established the town. Through the 1940s, Moises Ville had 7,000 residents, 95 percent of whom were Jewish, but the population has declined sharply as children moved to the big cities for educational and professional opportunities and their parents followed them. Some, like rancher Kurt Rosenthal, refuse. "The country is a passion," Kurt says. "If I had to choose again, I would do again what I've done for the last 47 years — work as a cowboy."

The children of Western Ghana's House of Israel community are the first generation of modern Ghanaians to be raised Jewish. Members of this community believe that their Sefwi ancestors descended from Jewish traders who came through Timbuktu. Most members of the Ghanaian community live in Sefwi Wiawso, a small city in the country's southwestern corner, near the Ivory Coast border. Every night the House of Israel community gathers to study Judaism. Shabbat is a particularly welcome break from the week's work, as are the evening meetings at Brother Isaiah's home.

*Stories adapted from Scattered Among the Nations, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the Jewish and non-Jewish world about the beauty and diversity of the Jewish people.*

## RITUAL CONNECTION

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

**Where is your family from originally? Who are you named after?**

## TAKEAWAY

As a symbol of the many hands that make bread possible, challah is a reminder that there are many Jewish stories in the world, some similar to our own, and some dramatically different.

# Gratitude

In the World to Come, no prayers will be needed except for prayers of gratitude.  
— Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 9

## BIG IDEA

Israelites. Hebrews. These are the monikers for the Jewish people in the Torah. Why are we now called Jews? We take the name from Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. “Let me thank God,” Leah says upon his birth, and names him *Yehudah* from the Hebrew to *give thanks*.

## RITUAL CONNECTION

בְּרִיךְ רַחֲמָנָא מַלְכָּא דְעֵלְמָא מְרִיבָה דְחַי פִּיתָא.

*Brich rachamana malka d'alma marei d'hai pita.*

We are blessed with compassion by the Oneness that sustains us with bread.

## REST STOP

**What do you love most about being Jewish?**

**If you had to pick one Jewish holiday, commemoration, or celebration to share with your best friends, which one would you choose?**

**Considering the vast canon of Jewish art and entertainment, what stands out to you as a great Jewish... song? book? movie?**

**What is your favorite Jewish food and why?**

## TAKEAWAY

To be Jewish is literally — in the very definition of the word — to be grateful.

