

WHY BE Jewish

A COMMUNAL RESPONSE



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.

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.

This guide is the third 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.

Welcome

Two truisms must be balanced both in education and in understanding the world: one is that everything is different from everything else; the other is that, in some way, everything is similar to everything else.

— Robert Audi, *On the Ethics of Teaching and the Ideals of Learning*

BIG IDEAS

Community: a group of people living in the same place or having particular characteristics in common; the people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities; a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.

Jewish Peoplehood: the collective aspects of Jewish identity and community that create connections among individuals, even strangers. In its strongest definition, a global community joined by covenant — a definite sense of purpose.

— Dr. Misha Galperin and Dr. Erica Brown, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood*

My assumption is that while Peoplehood is a vague and complicated concept, deep down we actually understand it, and some simply feel it. While we may have issues articulating exactly what it means, many of us are able to embrace a sense of belonging to a people that is meaningful, reasonably coherent and one that frames significant parts of our lives as members of the collective.

— Dr. Shlomi Ravid, *Peoplehood Now*

RITUAL CONNECTION

Whether this is the first time you've reflected on Jewish community and peoplehood, or your 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

Describe your (general, not necessarily Jewish) community.

In what ways and in what settings do you feel a sense of Jewish belonging, connection, and/or peoplehood?

TAKEAWAY

Our understanding of community, and relationship to the concept of peoplehood, are fundamental elements of the experience and expression of Jewish identity.

Light

כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה.

All Israel is responsible for one another.

— Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot 39a

BIG IDEAS

Between a poor person and a rich person, the poor person comes first. Between the poor of your community and the poor of another community, the poor of your community come first. Between the poor of your household and the poor of your community, your household comes first.

— Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 71a

The people of Israel are similar to a ship. If there is a hole in the lower hold, one does not say, Only the lower hold has a hole in it. Rather they must immediately recognize that the ship is liable to sink and that they must repair the hole down below.

— Midrash Eliyahu Rabbah

RITUAL CONNECTION

Why do we create light on Shabbat? There are many mystical and metaphorical reasons. But the essence of this *mitzvah*, this commandment, is communal responsibility. We create light so we may see the wine we drink, the food we eat. We create light so that we may see each other, so that one will not stumble over the other in the dark.

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

In what ways, if any, do you feel responsible for the wellbeing of other individual Jews? For the Jewish people as a whole?

What are some of the ways that you act on this sense of responsibility?

TAKEAWAY

אם אין אני לי מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו אימתי.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am for myself alone, what am I?

And if not now, when?

— Pirkei Avot 1:14

Wine

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ...
...בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ...

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...”

— Genesis 1:26

BIG IDEAS

In regard to *derech erez* (dignity and civility) and also in regard to *gemilut hasadim* (altruistic kindness) the non-Jew among us is to be treated as a Jew. Our Sages commanded us to visit non-Jews when ill, to bury their dead in addition to the Jewish dead, and support their poor in addition to the Jewish poor for the sake of peace. Because God is good to all and God’s mercies extend over all God’s works (Psalms 145:9) and because the Torah’s ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace (Proverbs 3:17).

— Rambam (12th Century) *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 12*

There are three primary reasons for supporting those who struggle: to act with compassion, to recognize them as your kin, and to sustain your community.

— Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (15th Century)

RITUAL CONNECTION

Kiddush, the use of wine to sanctify Shabbat, is a celebration of the universal alongside the particular, a juxtaposition of a general good, the fruit of the vine, with a uniquely Jewish good, Shabbat. It is an incredible invitation to consider our responsibilities as Jews, to each other and to the larger world.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגֶּפֶן.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ מְקַדֵּשׁ הַשַּׁבָּת.

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

Share some of your own commitments to volunteerism and charitable giving.

What, if any, tension do you feel between supporting Jews in need and Jewish causes, and supporting individuals in need and general causes?

TAKEAWAY

Work on behalf of the world need not entail rejection of the particular Jewish self even when that work is outside of the Jewish community. In fact, universalist work that brings about meaningful social change is a profound manifestation of the Jewish principles of *derech erez* (dignity and civility) and *gemilut hasadim* (altruistic kindness).

Bread

אם אין קמח אין תורה. אם אין תורה אין קמח.

Where there is no flour, there is no Torah. Where there is no Torah, there is no flour.

— Pirkei Avot 3:17

BIG IDEAS

Peoplehood appears the concept best suited by far to answer (or at least cope with) the quandary of Jewish identity. *Nation* and *religion* are each in their own way too big. They demand more than many Jews are willing to give in terms of belief or behavior and thus leave those Jews outsiders to a group which they know belongs to them and which they want very much to claim as their own. *Ethnicity* and heritage are too small. They miss out on a lot of what makes Jewish identity attractive and even compelling to many Jews — a part of the self for which they are profoundly grateful and that many are profoundly disappointed not to pass on. Only *peoplehood* seems just right. It betokens an identity in which religious as well as secular Jews, Israeli as well as Diaspora Jews, can feel at home.

— Dr. Arnold Eisen

Young Jewish adults care about uniquely Jewish issues just as much as universal ones. But two facts prove essential: first, they know far less about specifically Jewish concerns, so a major investment in knowing is critical. And two, they care deeply for other Jews but not at the exclusion of others. So if we want to foster Jewish peoplehood, we need to support their commitment to their people and the wider world. If we wish to foster a commitment to the Jewish people, we must lead with the unique and special responsibility that Jews have to other Jews. Lead with it—do not shy away or qualify—yet do not criticize their dedication to other people. And instead, help them frame this Jewishly too.

— Sarah Eisenman, *Jewish Peoplehood: From Values to Action*

RITUAL CONNECTION

Bread is like identity, foundational yet intricate. There are so many variables to consider, and small variations in the equation can produce dramatically different results. The blessing over the bread is an expression of thanks for that simple complexity.

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

Consider the words Eisen highlights in his consideration of Jewish identity: nation, religion, ethnicity, heritage. Contemplating your own sense of Jewish peoplehood, which of these words resonate, which repel, and why?

Eisenman reminds us that understanding uniquely Jewish issues is critical to the development of a sense of Jewish peoplehood. What are some of the distinctly Jewish concerns you know the most about, and what are some issues facing the Jewish community you want to know more about?

TAKEAWAY

Peoplehood is a complicated recipe — it has many components, and we will all experience it a little bit differently. It is essential, both as a concept factually describing the existence of the Jews as a people and as a value that describes the feeling of belonging and commitment to the Jewish people. There is no Judaism without it.

Gratitude

Giving thanks for being a part of the Jewish community, a people dedicated to making each other and the world a little bit better every single day.

BIG IDEAS

From "21 Queer Jews on Why We Love Being Jewish," *Autostraddle*, 2018

I love cooking for Shabbat. I love knowing that I'm gonna be a Jewish Mom. I love loving my religion. — *Vanessa*

I learned about the importance of community and chosen family from growing up Jewish, years before I encountered these ideas in a queer context. — *Jess*

Being Jewish, to me, means being a part of history. — *Mara*

To move through this country as a Jew means to assert your identity if you want to be recognized. — *Mal*

Each time I meet other Jews there is this immediate connection, a feeling of familiarity arisen from our collective history and culture, from the stories we share and the traditions we all honor. — *Dana*

I am grateful for my faith, for the conversations it has inspired, for the elders I have held hands with, for the questions it has raised in my life. — *Tavia*

Shabbat is a deep breath when I couldn't breathe. — *Al*

I love how resilient Jews are. — *Jazz*

I was taught that at its heart, Judaism is about trying to leave the world a little or a lot better than you found it. — *Dani*

Judaism taught me at a young age the importance of service and taking care of others. — *Mandy*

RITUAL CONNECTION

בְּרִידַי רַחֲמָנָא מַלְכָּא דְעֵלְמָא מְרִיבָה דְהַאי 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

Why do you love being Jewish?

What makes you most proud about the Jewish community, about being a part of this people?

TAKEAWAY

It's easy to forget that being Jewish is pretty awesome. Feeling and expressing gratitude for Judaism and its role in our lives and in the world can be a transformative part of the Jewish communal experience.

